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Individuals' Perceptions of Lifelong Learning and the Labour Market Competition - a Case Study in Shanghai, China

Qi Wang

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Education

August 2008

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Qi Wang

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Abstract

This study aims at understanding how individuals in Shanghai engage in labour market competition and lifelong learning in a newly marketised and competitive context. It probes the individuals' participation in 'the Training Programme for Talents in Shortage' (STTP), their perceptions of the value of lifelong learning and their experience in competing for employment. It takes the position that rather than focusing only on policy-makers' views, an understanding of people's perceptions and participation in this programme can provide a proper basis for the formulation and the evaluation of the policy on a learning society (Gerard and Rees, 2002).

STTP is a localized education and training programme in the post-compulsory sector, providing qualifications with largely local value. It has been developed and implemented by the Shanghai Municipal Government since 1993 as a means to enhance the city's stock of human capital and to promote the development of a 'learning society'. On the one hand, STTP is inspired and designed by straightforward human capital development concerns and has been implemented through a decentralized, semi-marketised approach, to maintain the momentum of the city's development by targeting key skills shortages. On the other hand, significant socio-economic changes, such as the emergence of a labour market, lead individuals to take on full personal responsibility for their own social position and to compete against each other. People seek to obtain all sorts of advantages to manage and construct their employability; this study investigates the role of STTP and its qualifications in building individuals' portfolio of skills, qualifications and other aspects of their individual human capital.

The thesis draws on two sets of literature: that on lifelong learning and employability, and that on sociological theories of engagement with and participation in lifelong learning, notably rational choice theory and theories of positional competition.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis were applied. A questionnaire was administrated to 279 course participants; and interviews were conducted with 11 course participants, 4 non-participants and 4 course deliverers and policy-makers. Both instruments explored perceptions and experiences of the labour market, reasons for participating (or not) in STTP, their views on lifelong learning and the relationship between STTP, lifelong learning and the labour market.

The finding suggests that a full understanding of individuals' work and learning involves an analysis of a complex of relational interdependence between socially and culturally derived factors and personally subjective views of whom they are. In addition, the finding suggests that certain aspects of STTP, coupled with existing perceptions of formal education in Shanghai on the one hand and various interpretations of the needs of the labour market on the other, may be acting to challenge the original intentions of the programme, especially in terms of building a learning society.

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Chapter 1 Introduction to the Thesis

1.1 Introduction

The initial interest from which this research arose is in the popularity of an education and training programme providing localized qualifications in Shanghai. The programme is called ‘the Training Programme for Talents in Shortage’ (*Shanghai shi jinque rencai peixun gongcheng*, literally translated as ‘Shanghai shortage talents training programme’, STTP), and has been developed and implemented by the Shanghai Municipal Government since 1993. On the one hand, as Shanghai’s economy progress has deepened and accelerated, so new aims and targets for economic development in Shanghai have been proposed. Accordingly, different skill demands have emerged in the labour market. From the government’s perspective, STTP is designed in terms of Human Capital Theory, for the purpose of skill development to meet anticipated market needs. On the other hand, competition in the Shanghai labour market has been commonly considered fierce, and people seek to obtain all sorts of advantages to improve their standing in this competition. From my personal experience of taking some STTP courses, it appears to be being used for purposes of both skill development and positional competition. Therefore, this research first seeks to investigate whether this personal experience and feelings are common among participants in STTP.

A further concern lay behind the genesis and development of this research. There is an increasing emphasis on building a learning society at both a national and a municipal level, in China and in Shanghai respectively. Since the late 1990s, to build a learning society and a lifelong learning system both in China and in Shanghai have been advocated and contained in the government (both the national government and Shanghai government) policy and strategy of ‘developing the city by relying on science and education’ (*ke jiao xing guo*). It has been reiterated in the latest ‘the Eleventh Five-year Plans’ of the Shanghai Municipal Government, which declares the following aims:

‘To speed up the construction of a modern education system. To make great effort in building a learning society; to continue to adhere to the strategy of developing education further ahead at a proper speed; to further deepen the

education reform; to implement a full-scale quality-oriented education; to complete the transformation of all kinds of education mechanisms; and to construct a lifelong learning system. ...' (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2006)

The question can, therefore, be posed as to what extent the development of STTP also fits in with the policy of building a learning society and a lifelong learning system.

From these two initial concerns, this research seeks to explore and understand the perceived knowledge of lifelong learning and a learning society among people in the context of Shanghai; and to examine whether different theoretical perspectives provide appropriate frameworks for the understanding of participation in STTP in a newly marketized and competitive context. Rather than focusing on policy-makers' views on these issues, the principal concerns in this research are with participants' views and perceptions, such as their experience in STTP and the meanings of STTP to them. This focus is partly due to the difficulty of gaining access to the policy makers for an individual researcher from a foreign university (even though the researcher is originally from China). Moreover, an understanding of people's participation can provide a proper basis for the formulation and the evaluation of the policy on a learning society (Gorard and Rees, 2002) and the policy on STTP in this specific context.

It is necessary to clarify and define the terms 'lifelong learning' and 'learning society' in this research. The notions of 'lifelong learning' and 'a learning society' have been prominent in the world since the 1960s (Tuijnman and Bostrom, 2002). In 'a learning society', education will be more central to society (Wain, 1993; in Aspin and Chapman, 2001). Not only the state, but also enterprises and individuals will be involved in the learning revolution, in which learning will take place in different forms throughout people's lifetime. Coffield (1997) provides a more detailed definition of a learning society:

'A learning society would be one in which all citizens acquire a high quality general education, appropriate vocational training and a job (or series of jobs) worthy of a human being while continuing to participate in education and training throughout their lives. A learning society would combine excellence

with equity and would equip all its citizens with the knowledge, understanding and skills to ensure national economic prosperity and much more besides.'
(Coffield, 1997, p1)

On the basis of this view, Gorard and Rees (2002, p1) summarize that a learning society involves '*a comprehensive post-school education and training system*', in which everyone has access to suitable opportunities for lifelong learning. This understanding of a learning society and lifelong learning as expressed by Gorard and Rees is broadly adopted in this research. In view of that, instead of discussing lifelong learning as individual learning and development 'from cradle to grave' (OECD, 1996), this research focuses on the education and training in the post-school/university sector.

1.2 Background to the research

This section will outline aspects of the social, economic and educational contexts in China and Shanghai that are seen to be relevant to this study. The development of the STTP programme and its policy context will also be described in relation to the broader contextual account. Gorard and Rees (2002) argue that an adequate theory of education and training must take into account social and economic changes over both time and place. The focus of this research is on one city, which permits and requires an in-depth analysis of changes over time and of the complex interaction of social, cultural and economic factors. Moreover, there are huge differentiations of social and economic conditions within the Chinese context, and so it is necessary to provide a separate analysis of the particular context of Shanghai, as the geographical focus in this research.

It is worthwhile pointing out that such socio-graphic accounts of places provide more than 'background information'. In Gorard and Rees's research on lifelong learning in South Wales, they emphasize the integral role of social, cultural and economic factors in shaping people's views and decisions on whether to participate or not in adult education and training (*ibid*). Related to this research, these factors also crucially influence people's decision-making in participating in STTP, their awareness of opportunities and challenges in the labour market competition, and their understandings of the roles of qualifications in relation to their skill development and labour market competition. Thus, a clear analysis of Shanghai's social and economic situation is essential to understand

individuals' perceptions of lifelong learning and the labour market competition that they face.

1.2.1 Changes in the Chinese context

The situation in China over the past two decades or so can be summarized by one word: 'change'. Changes have been taking place in all sorts of aspects, from various reforms on the state level to the social and economic lives of common people. In relation to this research, the primary emphasis will be on economic, educational and cultural changes.

Firstly, apart from the great progress in economic development, there are two main changes from the economic perspective. One is an institutional change in the economic regime: a market economy has been gradually adopted over the past 20 years to replace a planned economy. This comes along with diversified ownership implemented in all industries, i.e. a combination of state-owned, private-owned business and foreign investment, which requires people to quickly adjust and integrate themselves from a situation of secured assigned employment into a radically new situation where the notions of competition and market are emphasized to a much greater extent. The other change is the different skill demands emerging from different industries, especially under the impact of globalization and China's entry into WTO. Although a large majority of industries in China are still labour-intensive, some of them, such as in the financial and IT sectors, have raised needs for the upgrading of skills. Thereby, the development of upgraded skills can be understood as a strategy to promote further economic progress and to narrow the gap between China and more developed countries. As different Chinese cities have quite different emphases in their industrial development policies and play different roles in the national economy, the skill demands are also different among them. This point will be explained and discussed in the next section when relating the Shanghai context.

All these economic changes bring both hopes and challenges to people. On the one hand, the economy has expanded rapidly with an 8.6% average annual growth of GDP since 1983 (2004, 2006a, 2006b). Witnessing this achievement, people feel more confident about the nation's prospects. On the other hand, challenges of numerous types occur, including the continued existence of considerable poverty, rapidly growing inequality,

and fierce competition both in the domestic labour market and from the global business revolution (Nolan, 2004).

Secondly, from the educational perspective, liberalization of choices of education has been promoted, along with a more marketized educational system and expanded educational opportunities. Diversified routes and opportunities for education have been provided, such as public and private schools and universities and various programmes for lifelong learning. In other words, people are not necessarily constrained by the conventional, state-run school system; although the appearance of new options of the educational change process has been gradual and carefully controlled by the government. In particular, educational opportunities have been expanded in the form of massification of higher education. This originally aimed at serving national development, strengthening national power and enhancing social inclusion. However, it has also caused a series of problems. First, according to the supply-demand principle, as the supply of university degrees increases, the real value of the university degree will decrease (Hirsch, 1977). This expansion has led directly to and exacerbated credential inflation in China. Second, the expansion of higher education is far more rapid than the actual demand in the economy, which causes unemployment and under-utilization of graduates. As Zhang (2003) lists the data and states: statistically, once China has a 3% increase in GDP, the demands for university graduates will show a 2% increase. However, the fact is that the university undergraduate entrants have increased at an average rate of 27% each year in the past 5 years, while the average annual increase of GDP is about 8.6%. So university graduates are commonly considered to face the dilemma or risk of 'being unemployed immediately upon their graduation' (*'yi biye, jiu shiye'*) and 'being over-educated for certain jobs' (*'guodu jiaoyu xianxiang'*). In terms of competition and selection within the labour market, it may be that mere possession of a degree becomes less significant and which university issues the degree may become the main element to be considered in the hierarchical competition (Halsey, Lauder, Brown and Wells, 1997). At the same time, various lifelong learning programmes have been initiated and developed, which further expands the educational opportunities. It is possible, however, that the motivation to participate in these new 'lifelong learning opportunities' derives from their being seen simply as opportunities to gain further certificates in addition to a university degree, so as to stay ahead in the competition.

Thirdly, all these economic, educational and other changes have dynamically led to changes in people's values and ideology system. For example, Confucianism stresses norms and virtues such as 'frugality, diligence, hard work, self-sacrifice, discipline and collectivism'. The extent to which it influences people's lives has been modified, though retaining some of its original nature, in the process of absorbing and assimilating aspects of western cultures (Kim, 1994). To give a more specific example, while the extended family is still emphasized, individualism has become more acceptable. Another example is that people have begun to be concerned about their social class position in a supposedly classless society, and greater interests in research on stratification in the Chinese context has emerged since the end of last century (He, 2000; and Li, 2003). Meanwhile, the report on the 'First-generation Middle Class – Shanghai Middle Class Landscape' (Oriental Morning Post, 2004) points out that new social divisions are being more obviously formed, most notably centred on the emergence of a continuously increasing middle class. This new social division is characterized in terms of occupation, education and life styles. People who are already in this new group realize that only by making constant efforts can they maintain their status. However, due to changes in the nature of society, the economy and the structure of the labour market and a more general 'opening-up' of society, opportunities for social mobility have become relatively greater. Those who are currently excluded from the middle class believe that it is possible for them to compete and get into this group. Thus, there is increasing awareness of competition and self-development (Oriental Morning Post, 2004).

1.2.2 The research context of Shanghai

Shanghai, a coastal city in south-east China, is the national major financial and industrial centre of China. Bordering on Jiangsu and Zhejiang Province on the west, Shanghai is washed by the East China Sea. North of the city, the Yangtze River pours into this sea. It also enjoys a central location along China's coastal line. Owing to its advantageous geographic location and easy accesses to a vast hinterland, Shanghai has become an excellent transportation centre (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2002). According to the '2005 Communiqué', Shanghai enjoys a population of 13.6 million, with a negative increasing rate of -0.146%¹ (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2006). With less than 1.3% of the Chinese population and 0.06% of its geographical

¹ This perhaps surprising demographic trend arises largely from the one-child policy, but it has important consequences for the age structure of the work force.

land, Shanghai has achieved double figures in the GDP annual growth rate since 1992 (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2005). According to 'the Report of Chinese Cities Development' in both 2003 and 2005, Shanghai attained the first ranking in comprehensive competitiveness (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2004 and 2006). Shanghai is and will be continuously expected to play a leading role in China's economy, especially after its entry into WTO.

-- A brief history of economic development in Shanghai

Shanghai, in contrast to other major cities such as Beijing and Nanjing², has a much shorter history and a very different function. Only since the late 13th century, has Shanghai gradually developed into a city, more specifically a seaport and a commercial city. A significant foreign presence, from the 1840s to the early 20th century, contributed to the transformation of Shanghai into one of the greatest cities in the world: 'the Paris of the East' and 'a paradise for adventurers' (Oriental Morning Post, 2004). Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Shanghai has become one of the major industrial bases in China.

Although radical changes took place in Shanghai after 1949, Shanghai was able to maintain high economic productivity and relative social stability, even during the time of the Cultural Revolution. In 1991, Shanghai was permitted to initiate its own economic reforms. Both foreign and domestic investment have been encouraged in order to promote Shanghai as the economic hub of East Asia, with plans to improve its role as the gateway for investment to the Chinese interior (Waters, 1997). Since 1992, it has achieved double figures in its GDP annual growth rate, recently achieving 13.6% and 11.1% growth in 2004 and 2005 (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2005 and 2006). With less than 1.3% of the Chinese population and 0.06% of its geographical land, the city generated 5.45% of the total national GDP (89.6/1,653.8 US\$ billions) in 2004; and it far outperforms other metropolitan cities in China in terms of per-capita GDP (*ibid*). As economic development continues and accelerates, the Shanghai Municipal Government has set up a long-term goal of transforming Shanghai into 'a socialist modern international cosmopolitan city and one of the economic, finance, trade

² Beijing and Nanjing enjoy much longer history than Shanghai. Beijing was and is the capital city in China, and it is considered as the Chinese cultural and political centre. Nanjing was the capital city in the Ming Dynasty and briefly in the mid-20th century. It is an ancient city famous for its cultural heritage.

and transport centres of the world' and 'leading the country in initially realizing modernization' (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2005).

Shanghai economic history and the goal of city development reveal the government's emphasis on developing and improving the tertiary economic sector. According to the municipal government statistics, the total production of the tertiary economic sector accounts for 75% of the total GDP in Shanghai. In '*the Eleventh Five-year Plan*', the development of a diversified tertiary economic sector is viewed as an essential pathway for Shanghai's transformation to a cosmopolitan city. The plan states that

- To reinforce the development principle of 'three (the tertiary economic sector), two (the secondary economic sector), one (the primary economic sector)';
- To accelerate the construction of newly emerged industries;
- To further consolidate the economic progress by emphasising the development of both the secondary and tertiary economic sectors: accelerating the development in the advanced/ modern service sector, and upgrading the capacity of the manufacturing industry;
- To accelerate the overall transformation from a production economy to a service economy.

(Bureau of Personnel of Shanghai, 2006)

These changes to the economic structure are accompanied by the fact emergence of an increasing number of new types of jobs in the labour market. For instance, the Shanghai government identified 65 new types of jobs in 2004 (Shanghai Labour and Security Bureau, 2004). These new jobs are mainly in the field of IT and designation, management, environment and other service sectors. According to the government, these new jobs are characterized by their combined requirements of professional knowledge and practical skills. The emergence of the new jobs reflects the growing and changing demand of economic development in Shanghai. In particular, it is a response to rapid technological and scientific changes.

However, the government also realizes the difficulties ahead. Looking back to history, the development of the economic tertiary sector has been quite slow. This was due to three factors. First, tertiary industry started developing relatively late in China and in Shanghai, only in the 1990s, did it start to accelerate its development (Shanghai

Municipal Government, 2004). Second, the government did not have a clear target or direction for its development. And third, the secondary industrial sector which was the previous focus of development has a relatively large base. It will take a long time to adjust the industrial structure (Science and Technology Commission of Shanghai Municipality, 2006). How to overcome these difficulties becomes the most important concern. In *'the Eleventh Five-year Plan'*, the aims of developing the tertiary sector have been clearly defined, that is, to focus on the development of finance, logistics, business, real estate, tourism and information services, and to develop knowledge-intensive services, such as cultural activities, education, expositions and consultancy (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2006). Meanwhile, government officials also point out that it is essential to improve the human resource in Shanghai to improve the development of the tertiary economic sector (Science and Technology Commission of Shanghai Municipality, 2006). Promoting the capability of services in Shanghai depends on this improvement of the human resource. However, Shanghai is still in the process of transition to a cosmopolitan city, and still has a critical deficit in terms of its human capital.

-- The labour market trends in Shanghai

China has begun a path from a planned economy to a market economy. Market reforms are taking place in all sorts of spheres, such as production, pricing, sales, finance, etc. There is no exception in the sphere of labour. Accordingly, China is also on a path from an egalitarian labour system to a competitive labour market (Knight and Song, 2005). Knight and Song also point out that the labour market in China remains particularly imperfect and incomplete: but undoubtedly there are great changes taking place.

First, the nature of the work-unit (*danwei*) has been changed in the economic reform (Venter, 2004; and Knight and Song, 2005). *Danwei* referred to the urban, publicly owned organizational unit in which workers are employed (Knight and Song, 2005, p21). Before the reform, it was a social unit, playing a role of binding the employees to the unit in a culture of dependence in terms of housing, medical treatment, childcare and pensions (Venter, 2004; Knight and Song, 2005). Within this system, employment was allocated, based on the employees' educational qualifications but in reality more often

on party lines and dependent on *guanxi*³ (Coady and Wang, 2000; Venter, 2004; and Knight and Song, 2005). After the economic reform, along with the emergence of diversified ownership, companies and enterprises have come into form with different ideologies. For example, there is greater flexibility of employment in terms of hiring, dismissal and labour mobility for both employers and employees (Mok, *et al*, 2002; Price and Fang, 2002; Xiao, 2003; Venter, 2004; and Knight and Song, 2005). Meanwhile, companies and enterprises, in both the public sector and private sector, will take on more responsibility in terms of productivity, financing, sales and employment; and individual employees will be largely self-responsible for their survival in the marketplace. According to a survey by the Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau (2003), people think they are facing more challenges and feeling increasing insecurity in their employment, although along with increasing job opportunities.

Second, *hukou*, the household registration system, is another important characteristic of life in China. Before the economic reform, the Chinese population was divided into urban-*hukou* and rural-*hukou*, which also characterized the Chinese society as a dual economy. Moreover, the spatial mobility of labour was severely controlled and restricted by means of *hukou* (Knight and Song, 2005). In other words, urban-*hukou* holders were protected from the inward migration of rural-*hukou* holders in terms of their job opportunities. However, since the economic reform, the *hukou* system has been modified and reformed. For example, the Shanghai Municipal Government has accelerated the reform of the residence administration system and successfully launched a special residence policy or scheme for the professionals the city urgently needs⁴. Immigration to Shanghai has become possible – and even encouraged – for those high skilled workers. They are both in high demand for Shanghai's socio-economic development and welcome by the Shanghai government. The municipal government has set up a scheme called 'residence card' to encourage and attract those high skilled workers to work and live in Shanghai, along with offering other benefits, such as accommodation and bursaries for their children's education. Although a study carried out by Peking University (Qiu, Wen and Ding, 2004) shows the negative influence of

³ *Guanxi* means 'connections', similar to the notion of 'social capital'. It is crucial in almost all social and business transactions in China.

⁴ By the end of 2003, 27,800 professionals from China and abroad who initiated their own business or work in the city had received the special 'Shanghai Residence Card'. Among the total, 68.7% hold a university degree or above and 9.8% hold a master or doctoral degree (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2005).

hukou on graduates' employment on a nation-wide scale, the residence card scheme to some extent has weakened the membership role of the household registration system. It allows more competitors into the employment competition in Shanghai.

Third, the above changes also inspire individuals' realization of competition and self-responsibilities along with increasing both opportunities and risks from the economic reform. Xie (2004) argues that the new marketized economy has changed people's attitudes and opinions towards society and themselves. Confronting both opportunities and risks, people feel more freedom to develop as individuals and are progressively more aware of the importance of self-independence, self-discipline and self-support. Therefore, individualism emerges in co-existence with forms of the traditional collectivism, such as the family.

1.2.3 Shanghai's skills profile

Shanghai's skills profile has improved substantially over the last two decades. For example, 12-year compulsory schooling has been basically realized in Shanghai. Moreover, the citizens have attained averagely about 13 years of schooling, and 15 years for those new entrants to the labour force. Higher education has also developed rapidly. According to the government statistics in 2001, 11.4% of people above the age of 6 (sic!) have college and university degrees, making a 66.4% increase from the figure for 1990; the university enrolment rate had reached over 50% of the relevant age group in the previous three years (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2001).

However, compared with the situation in developed countries, the level of human resource is still considered to be less than satisfactory in Shanghai. This is reflected in three aspects. First, the overall scale of human capital actually available is relatively small. By the end of 2000, only 14.89% of the population above the age 25 were science and technology professionals, for example, compared with 21.17% in Japan (STTP head office, 2005). Second, the overall educational level of human capital is lower. In particular, only 6.45% people above the age of 25 year had received higher education by the end of 2000 (*ibid*). The fact that educational expansion is a recent phenomenon, together with the effect of the Cultural Revolution⁵, does much to explain the lack of educated manpower overall, even though new entrants to the labour market are well

⁵ During the Cultural Revolution period, the educational system was massively disrupted (Cleverley, 1985).

educated. Third, the structure of human capital is less balanced in relation to the city development targets. In the service sector, advanced management personnel had reached an average age of 54, with 80% of people close to their retirement (*ibid*). What is worse, there are serious shortages in those industries which will play an important role in economic development, such as logistics, finance, and business⁶.

In ‘The Report of Chinese Cities Development’ (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2004 and 2006), despite its holding the first rank in potential power for development, overall economic strength, government management, etc, Shanghai is pointed out as being less competitive in aspects of human capital (ranking second to Beijing) and entrepreneurship (ranking seventh)⁷, and showing insufficient development in hi-tech industries. In response, the municipal government has identified talent shortages in nine fields, namely, finance and insurance, estate management, infrastructure construction, international business, international law, advanced accounting, tourism, professional foreign language, and entrepreneurship. So a further upgrading in human resources will be required to meet the desired target to turn Shanghai into ‘a truly global city’. Furthermore, in spite of its strategic location, Shanghai has no natural resources or advantages. This is undoubtedly a disadvantage for economic development. In order to create its comparative advantages, it is imperative for Shanghai to improve its human resources and skill supplies (Ashton, Green, *et al*, 1999; Brown, Green, *et al*, 2001; and Science and Technology Commission of Shanghai Municipality, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, the municipal government has responded to these challenges by launching a special residence policy, in the form of a ‘Shanghai Residence Card’ for the professionals the city urgently needs, in addition to the usual system of *hukou*. Moreover, the Shanghai government re-emphasizes the objective of talent cultivation:

- To reinforce the power and competitiveness of the city;
- To strengthen the capacity for innovation;
- To enhance the comprehensive quality of the citizens and to create a spiritual outlook appropriate to a modern international metropolis. (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2005)

⁶ These data are a little dated, particularly in view of the rapid pace of educational expansion, so that more recent figures might show an improved situation. But then state that precise recent figures could not be located

⁷ It can be argued that Shanghai relies on FDI to a great extent, which requires managerial personnel rather than entrepreneurs.

Specifically, '*the Eleventh Five-year Plan*' has stated:

- To accelerate the process of cultivating, locating and utilizing talented people;
- To strengthen the construction of three groups of talented people in the fields of politics and Party, entrepreneurs and professionals;
- To complete the system of selecting, evaluating, testing and rewarding talents;
- To fully develop the role of the market to allocate talented people;
- To regulate the labour market and build up a flexible mechanism of talent mobility;
- To provide sufficient resource for personnel training; and
- To create a healthy environment for people of talent to come forth in large numbers.

(Wenhui Press, 2006).

In addition, the strategy of 'developing the city by relying on science and education' has been reiterated. Education and training has been put at the centre of the strategy. Within the education and training system, lifelong learning has been considered as having a crucial role to play in the realization of talent cultivation, from the government's perspective. Furthermore, to develop adult education is viewed as the prerequisite for building a lifelong learning system and a learning society (Shanghai Municipal People's Congress, 2005).

1.2.4 Lifelong learning policy in Shanghai

Shanghai is considered as being among the first cities to develop the ideology of 'lifelong learning' and 'a learning society' and to implement the policy into action in China; and it is the first area to set up relevant regulations on lifelong learning and on building a learning society in China (Shanghai Education Committee, 2007). In the early 1980s, the municipal government organized experts and academics to discuss and conduct a study on western countries' experience on developing lifelong learning. In the mid-1990s, a group of experts and scholars from governmental organizations, higher education institutions and social research institutions was formed, which was the leading group and specializing in studying and researching in lifelong learning in China. By the end of the 1990s, the municipal government proposed the goal of 'developing a learning society and building a lifelong learning system' (Shanghai Education Committee, 2007). This goal has proposed continuously in the city development plan in

the year 2004, 2005 and 2006. In the year 2005, a decree entitled ‘Shanghai Lifelong Learning Regulations’ was enacted. It includes specific aspects:

- the rationales, goals and conditions of building a lifelong learning system and enacting relevant regulations;
- defining lifelong learning, its meaning, content and scope in the Shanghai context;
- regulating the doctrines to implement lifelong learning policy, based on a learner-centred principle;
- classifying the relationship between citizenship education and lifelong learning and integrating these two systems;
- identifying responsibilities and tasks of relevant departments and institutions;
- clarifying the concepts of lifelong learners and their responsibilities and tasks;
- regulating the types of organizations to promote lifelong learning and multiple learning modes and tasks;
- stipulating the mechanisms for developing and implementing lifelong learning policy; and
- regulating relevant rules and resources to ensure the residents’ participation in lifelong learning.

(Shanghai Municipal People’s Congress, 2005)

Considering the current conditions of Shanghai’s human resource development and its future plans, the ‘Shanghai Lifelong Learning Regulations’ aims at the following by the year 2010:

- to build an opened-up, diversified, integrated and appropriate educational structure;
 - to increase the duration of compulsory education and training to fourteen years;
 - to reach the participation rate of 60% of the total population by increasing learning community and learning enterprises to 30% in society, developing a 80% participation rate for all workers (from 41% in the previous year) and a 90% participation rate for highly skilled workers, and encouraging 55% of the retired population to take part in lifelong learning;
 - to implement a modern ‘lifelong’ education and training system; and
 - to accomplish an overall target that every citizen will have equal learning opportunity
- (Shanghai Education Committee, 2005).

From the above information, it is clear to see the socio-economic goals and rationales to develop lifelong learning in building a learning society in Shanghai. First, the policy is heavily laden with economic imperatives. It aims at developing the human capital supply in Shanghai to overcome present skill shortages. The regulation identifies human capital shortages in six pillar industries of finance and investment, information communication, commercial business, automobile production; in three strategic industries, real estate and complete sets of equipments, namely bio-chemistry, materials and aviation; and in several newly-emerged service industries. The regulation clearly aims at improvement in terms of human resource distribution, knowledge structure and its overall quality.

Second, the regulation also aims at promoting social inclusion and self-fulfillment by stating clearly the intention to develop equal learning opportunities promote individual self-development. The regulation emphasizes the importance of equal learning opportunities, so as 'to guarantee individual citizen to develop themselves, to plan their life courses, to realize their dreams, and in turn to make their contribution to society' (*ibid*). This statement can be seen as an emphasis on the role of social trust and cooperation in promoting economic growth on an equitable basis (Coffield, 1999a).

Therefore, from the perspective of the Shanghai Municipal Government, the policy on lifelong learning and a learning society is mainly oriented by consensus theories. Implicitly, the regulation does not show much emphasis or tendency to leave all learning responsibility to individual learners. It only mentions in broad terms the encouragement of individual citizens' learning participation by emphasizing the social, family and individual benefits of learning and the formation of a lifelong learning financing mechanism combining investment from the municipal government funding, communities' support and individuals' educational input. However, a study carried out by the Shanghai Social Science Research Institution (2005) indicates that the investment and support from the municipal government is not adequate. The demand for the development of a learning society can not be met by investment from the government alone. In addition, the funding resource is not diversified: there is no provision for support from employers, for example. This leads to two results. First, lack of financial support results in slow development of lifelong learning in Shanghai. For example, certain learning programmes, like adult vocational education, have poor teaching

resources, infrastructure, and as a consequence poor learning quality. Second, individuals are encouraged, if not forced, to invest more in their own learning. This can be seen as a hidden message that individuals will take on more responsibility for their own learning and work. If this is the case, we can argue that the government adopts, or at least employs certain elements from, a neo-liberal model to develop lifelong learning and create a learning society in Shanghai, although this is not stated explicitly in the policies.

1.2.5 Adult education system in Shanghai

As the focus of this research is on the post-school/university sector; therefore, the introduction to the education and training system will mainly focus on the adult education system in Shanghai. The education and training system in Shanghai is relatively advanced for China. It has three integrated sectors: formal education, provision of supplementary adult education programmes and on-the-job training (Xiao, 1999). All these three components of the education and training systems have been expanded and developed, so as to meet the high demand for highly skilled worker resulting from rapid changes at work. Formal education consists of compulsory education (six years of primary education and three years of lower secondary education), three-year upper secondary education with academic and vocational components, three-year colleges, four years of university and further postgraduate education. The provision of on-the-job training has increased. It is provided by employers to raise skill levels of employees as the market become more competitive (*ibid*).

The development of adult education in Shanghai can be traced back to the early twentieth century. It has experienced rapid development since the 1980s, both in response to the demand of economic development in Shanghai and to individuals' demand (Wu, 2003). More than five hundred thousand people were taking various sorts of adult education courses in 2005 (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2006). The current adult education sector in Shanghai can be summarized as in the following table (Table 1.2.5). The adult education sector is divided here into education leading to academic qualifications and education not leading to academic qualifications.

Adult education leading to academic qualifications, namely adult higher education, adult vocational education and adult secondary education, is targeted at adults who may

have missed education opportunities in their early years but would like to study and obtain academic degrees or diplomas. Due to the relatively high education standard and development in Shanghai, this section of adult education is mainly at college level and undergraduate level. After taking courses through any of the modes, students will sit ‘Self-taught adult education examinations’. In 2005, 280,000 citizens studied in adult education courses leading to academic degrees in Shanghai (*ibid*). This type of degree-related adult education is mainly organized and certificated by the Chinese central government, rather than at a city level.

Table 1.2.5 Types of adult education programme in Shanghai

Education leading to academic qualifications	Education not leading to academic qualifications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adult secondary education - Adult vocational education - Adult higher education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Adult university * Continuing education institutions in higher education * Open university on TV * Distance education * E-learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Skill training programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * primary level * intermediate level * advanced level - social and cultural education - University for the third age - On-the-job training

Non-academic-qualification accrediting courses include skill training programmes at primary, intermediate and advanced levels, social and cultural education and training, and universities for the third age. These courses are not academic qualification related, but participants will obtain certificates after passing the examinations. More than 300,000 citizens took part in such training in 2005 in Shanghai (*ibid*).

The STTP programme that is the focus of this study can be counted as non-academic-qualification skill training courses. But again, as stated early, participants will obtain certificates after passing the examinations in STTP.

1.2.6 STTP: a localized education and training programme

STTP, set up in 1993, is firstly aimed at training and generating talents in nine fields, identified in response to the social and economic development needs. These nine fields are finance and insurance, estate management, infrastructure construction, international business, international law, advanced accounting, tourism, professional foreign language, and entrepreneurship. STTP also targets enhancing citizens' and workers' foreign language and computer skills. Ultimately, the programme wishes to foster a large group of comprehensively talented workers who have a good command of advanced technology, international rules and regulations, foreign languages, and also generic skills, to meet the urgent demand for increased skill levels and economic development of Shanghai. (STTP head office, 2005)

STTP is a local education and training programme. The general system and mechanism of STTP are as follows, 'the local government plays a leading role; the local industries are responsible for the management of the projects; the local higher education institutions have autonomy over their involvement in the programme; and students can participate in accordance with their needs and wishes' (*ibid*). The two parts of this programme, training and assessment, are administered independently of each other, which gives STTP greater flexibility. Individual learners can organize and plan their learning according to their own needs, rather than being forced to take courses in order to sit exams.

The general characteristics of STTP can be summarized as:

- 1) a localized education and training programme, offering a localized qualification;
- 2) providing industry-related courses; engaging higher education institutions' participation to assure quality; adopting a course structure that meets the demands of students from different educational backgrounds; and
- 3) creating a lifelong learning culture and motivating citizens' participation.

After more than ten years' development, STTP has built up a well-organized system of training and assessment. The number of courses provided has increased from about 10 to more than 60 (see Appendix 1). According to the STTP website, participation in the programme has exceeded 4.3 million person-courses. Moreover, the characteristics of participants have altered in several aspects. For example, in the first 5 years of its

development, the participants were largely Shanghai residents, while more and more people from outside Shanghai, both people living in Shanghai but without a Shanghai *hukou* and people actually residing outside the city, have taken part as well in recent years. Also, not only those with working experience, but also university students actively participate in some courses. In addition, some courses have also been introduced to be delivered in other neighbouring cities, while other parts of China still seem to have little information about it.

1.3 Research aims and questions

This study has two primary aims. The first one is to explore individuals' motivations and decision making in participating in an education and training programme and individuals' perceptions of the value of lifelong learning in a newly marketized and competitive context. The second one is to examine whether different theoretical perspectives provide appropriate frameworks for the understanding and analysis of participation in STTP.

The specific research questions are:

- What is the nature of opportunity and competition in the Shanghai labour market from individuals' perspectives?
 - How do individuals view the competition?
 - What factors are necessary and important in the competition?
 - In what ways, do those factors work in the competition as perceived?
 - What are individuals' perceptions about the nature and role of human capital in relation to the labour market?
- What is the nature of STTP, a localized education and training programme, and its qualifications provided in the labour market?
 - To what extent can STTP fit in to the notion of lifelong learning?
 - What is or should be lifelong learning from the perspectives of individuals?
 - What are individuals' motivations to participate in STTP?

- How do individuals perceive the intentions and characteristics of STTP? And what are the similarities and differences compared with those training courses set up by the central government?
- What are the perceived relationships between education and training and qualification?
 - What are the roles of qualifications to enhance individuals' competitive advantages in the labour market?
 - What are the roles of qualifications in initiating people's participation in lifelong learning?
 - What are individuals' perceptions about the nature and role of human capital with respect to education, training and qualification?

1.4 The significance of the research

The significance of the research lies in four aspects. First, China is commonly considered different from western countries in terms of its culture, ideologies and its nature in a socialist country. Meanwhile, greatly influenced by globalization, changes have taken place rapidly in China, particularly in respect to social and economic development. The radical changes, as argued earlier, also lead to the demand for new skills and accordingly the higher demand for education and training. These changes have also opened up a new arena for increased positional competition, as the social stratification of Chinese society is changing. The dynamic development and expansion of China has been reckoned as incomparably greater than historical experience elsewhere (Levin and Xu, 2005). Thus, this research context is qualitatively different and valuable compared with previous and similar research carried out elsewhere.

Moreover, instead of talking about China as a whole, it is necessary to look at different areas separately, in order to get a better in-depth understanding of the Chinese context; because different cities and regions in China have experienced quite different levels and forms of social and economic development. In particular, Shanghai is the largest industrial city in China and is expected to play a leading role in China's future. Also, because of its complicated history and unique modernism, Shanghai has been compared to 'a dreamland' in China (Oriental Morning Post, 2004); and the competition in the

labour market has been commonly considered fierce. Shanghai's special position makes this research highly interesting and of considerable potential value to provide a vivid, in-depth picture of the labour market competition as it emerges in the 'new China'. What is more, this research focuses on an attempt to generate a 'joined-up' relationship between education and training in the post-school/university sector and the labour market in the Shanghai context. Brooks (2006) argues in his research that the dominant conceptualizations of a learning society have undergone some change; that is, learning is now closely tied to achieving and then sustaining individual competitiveness within the labour market. Therefore, the significance of the interplay and dynamic relationship between education and training and the labour market competition can not be underestimated.

Third, STTP enjoys a particular uniqueness. Despite the similarities to other skill development programmes, such as NVQ in UK, the localized nature of STTP stands out. Additionally, STTP has been developed for more than ten years and is continuously expanding its scale. The reputation of the STTP courses and their qualifications has been commented on as '*deeply-rooted in people's heart*' (STTP head office, 2005). Moreover, Xiao (1999 and 2002) conducted research on human capital development in the transforming economy by using Shenzhen and Shanghai as examples and indicated that employers and workers choose from a variety of educational avenues to satisfy the training needs of the workforce. While her focus was on a variety of education and training provision, such as formal education, on-the-job training and adult education, this research puts a different emphasis on the driving force behind the popularity of the localized skill development programme STTP and the relationship with lifelong learning.

Last but not least, the significance is to investigate the extent to which social theories commonly adopted in western countries can be applied and transferred to the newly marketized eastern context. There are four theoretical points underpinning this research, i.e. Human Capital Theory (HCT), Positional Competition Theory (PCT), Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and the notion of learner identity. These four theories and theoretical frameworks have been generated and developed largely in western societies, where relatively stable social structure exists and education has for some time played a central role of reproducing those structures. However, compared with the stable

contexts in the west, the development in China is explosive. This leads to interesting questions. For instance, as a supposedly classless society, cultural capital and social capital (as family background) do have influence on educational opportunity and personal achievement (Hao, 2001; and Li, 2003). Will positional competition take place in the same form in China as class-based societies such as the UK and France? In addition, as Gorard and Rees (2002, p.16) have argued, individual behaviour in economic markets of any kind *'is embedded in social relations that are shaped by social norms, interpersonal relationship, family and community structures and so forth'*. Will rationality be differently viewed in the Chinese context? Thus, by examining the applicability and transferability of theoretical frameworks in this newly marketized context with socialist characteristics, this research will hopefully contribute to theoretical development.

1.5 The outline of this thesis

This thesis consists of four parts. The first part provides the contextual and theoretical issues for this research. Chapter 1 accounts for the background information on the localized learning programme STTP and its relevant socio-economic, education and training policies in China and Shanghai in particular. The research interest and initiatives gives the problems and questions for the research. Focusing on the relevant socio-economic theories and factors, Chapter 2 reviews the notions of lifelong learning, a learning society and employability. Two competing theoretical positions on the role of education and training in both national economic development and individual prosperity are discussed, namely, consensus theory and conflict theory. The discussion on these two theoretical stances extended in terms of participation in learning and as well as employability development. From a sociological perspective, Chapter 3 illustrates the need for an adequate social theory to analyze and understand individuals' learning management. Two preliminary theoretical frameworks, rational choice theory and the notion of identity, are proposed to be adopted in this research. The adoption of such frameworks is for the purposes of combining and integrating both social structure and agency into the analysis on people's participation in lifelong learning and employment competition.

The second part of this thesis is on research design and methodology. Bearing in mind the nature of this study and its aims, Chapter 4 draws references from the literature on research design and methodology and set out a mixed methodology for this study, that is, quantitative method facilitating qualitative method. A number of research methods including questionnaire, secondary analysis and interview were employed for the research purposes. This chapter also reviews that how the research instruments were identified, developed, piloted and applied in this research. The analysis of the data is discussed, including issues of validity and reliability.

Part three presents and discusses the research findings. This research has two focus, people's experience in the employment competition and their participation in the programme STTP. Chapter 5 concentrates on people's experiences and their perceptions of labour market competition. Relating to their background as well as their experiences in the labour market competition, Chapter 6 provides spaces to present the individual interviewees' stories on their learning management. It is followed by a synthesized analysis on individuals' choices and decisions to engage in lifelong learning and STTP.

Part four which comprises Chapter 7 presents conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 2 Literature Review: Lifelong Learning in Late Modernity

2.1 Introduction

The notion of ‘lifelong learning’, -- that is, learning taking place throughout the lifespan, and the notion of ‘a learning society’, -- that is, an educated society and a learning market, in which learners adopt a learning approach to life -- have risen prominently and profusely in policy agendas in many countries and organizations across the world (Edwards, 1997; Field, 2006). If a learning society is considered as a goal of social and economic development, then lifelong learning is considered as a means of achieving such a goal. These two notions have become a key vehicle to promote both national economic competitiveness and social cohesion (Sheehan, 2001; Aspin and Chapman, 2001; Tuijnman and Bostrom, 2002; Green, 2006). Combined with the official policy discourse, there is increasing evidence, showing a general agreement that a one-off dose of school will not serve to get people through the many challenges and opportunities that inevitably lie ahead in their lives (Field, 2006). However, these two notions are also considered as ‘rainbow concepts’ as they, beautifully and simply, include a range of meanings and ideas with a spectrum of purposes (Evans, 2006; Field, 2006). Preoccupied with similar but many different concerns, different organizations, national or local governments, and educational systems give different interpretations to the idea of ‘lifelong learning’ in terms of its form, content and direction. Rather than engaging in a vain search for an uncontested meaning of lifelong learning, Aspin and Chapman (2000, 2001) suggest that the best way to understand its meaning is to look at the use of the term in international discussions of educational policy, planning and administration. It is important to point out here that this research does not aim to provide a more refined definition of lifelong learning or a learning society, but to utilize different rationales of these concepts to explore, explain and understand people’s participation in education and training and their experience in the labour market competition. For the purposes of my own research and data analysis, I adopt a ‘working understanding’ of lifelong learning, as discussed in Chapter 1, although recognition of the diversity of interpretation also influences my writing.

This chapter will focus on the literature and discussions on lifelong learning and its various political, economic and cultural contexts, in order to guide the readers in their understanding of the application of the term ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘a learning society’ within the context of this research.

2.2 What is lifelong learning and a learning society?

The concept of ‘lifelong learning’, which emerged in the late 1960s, has experienced several transmutations, such as lifelong education, continuing education, recurrent education and so on. The OECD, choosing the goal of ‘lifelong learning for all’ in 1996, suggests that

‘Lifelong learning is best understood as a process of individual learning and development across the life-span, from cradle to grave – from learning in early childhood to learning in retirement. It is an inclusive concept that refers not only to education in formal settings ... but also to ‘life-wide’ learning in informal settings ...’ (OECD, 1996)

This concept of lifelong learning is based on three principles or features, that is, ‘lifelong’, ‘life-wide’ and ‘learning’ (OECD, 2004; Schuetze and Casey, 2006). Firstly, the basic idea underpinning it is that learning can and should occur throughout each person’s lifetime, rather than stopping at the end of compulsory education or university studies (Knapper and Cropley, 2000; Aspin and Chapman, 2001).

Secondly, taking a systemic view, the lifelong learning framework recognizes the importance of not only formal but also non-formal and informal learning in diverse settings (OECD, 1996). Wain (1987) argues that valid learning does not only take place through organized formal activities, but also includes the process of gaining and developing attitudes, values, skills and knowledge through the experience of life. Although lifelong learning is a large, overarching concept embracing all learning activities from infancy throughout adult life, the discussion and analysis in this thesis will focus on the post-school sector in line with the research aims and context.

Third, the concept of lifelong learning emphasizes self-directed learning, occurring through a variety of modes and opportunities, rather than relying exclusively on formal teaching provision. 'Learning to learn' is considered as an essential foundation for learning throughout life. This notion also shifts the attention from a supply side focus, such as formal institutional arrangements for learning, to the demand side of meeting learner needs (OECD, 2004).

The notion of 'a learning society' is a parallel concept to lifelong learning. The working definition of this concept adopted in this thesis has been discussed in Chapter 1.

2.3 Different versions of lifelong learning and of a learning society

In the development of the concept of a learning society, Rees and Bartlett (1999) have proposed three different and contrasting versions, namely, the skill growth model, the personal development model and the social learning model. These three models imply different ways and rationales to understand these two notions. Aspin and Chapman (2001) similarly suggest that lifelong learning has a triadic nature composed of the following central elements:

- for economic progress and development;
- for personal development and fulfilment; and
- for social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity.

Edwards (1997, p.184) also argues that a learning society consists of three strands, which respectively support lifelong learning in terms of its triadic nature. First, a learning society is an educated society, providing learning opportunities to educate adults to meet the challenges of change and citizenship. This strand is committed to liberal democracy and equal opportunities. The second strand sees a learning society as a learning market, driven by and emphasising on economic competitiveness and individual achievements. Education and training, provided by a wide range of institutions, aims to meet the demands of both employers and employees to upgrade skills and competences. Third, Edwards (*ibid*) identifies that a learning society is one in which learners adopt a learning approach to life. A wide range of education and training resource enables individuals to undertake their own learning. This supports lifelong learning as a condition for self-development. These three strands echo to the three

models of learning society suggested by Rees and Bartlett (1999) (above). So, similarly to lifelong learning, there are shared commitments to the notion of ‘a learning society’, but more often than not it masks considerable variety of interpretations (Ranson, 1998). In spite of there being different perspectives on lifelong learning and a learning society, the advocate of these two notions can be conceived as a way of making sense of a period of change, economically, socially and culturally (Ranson, 1998; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Coffield (1999a) argues apart from these three models a fourth model has emerged, namely, the social control model. This section will review these different versions of lifelong learning and of a learning society.

2.3.1 Lifelong learning for economic progress and development: the skill growth model

Education and training has long been considered as an engine for economic progress and national development (Wolf, 2002). Lifelong learning, continual upgrading of work and life skills throughout life (OECD, 2004), is viewed as playing a central role in individual and social and national prosperity, especially in this era of a knowledge-based global economy. Governments and organizations around the world stress the urgent requirement for and the implementation of lifelong learning as a means and strategy to develop and improve the human capital of its workforce, so as to achieve economic success:

‘Success in realising lifelong learning ... will be an important factor in promoting employment, economic development, democracy and social cohesion in the years ahead.’ (OECD, 1996)

‘Preparing workers to compete in the knowledge economy requires a new model of education and training, a model of lifelong learning.’ (World Bank, 2003, p.3)

‘Learning is the key to prosperity - for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century.’ (DfEE, 1998)

'To build up a lifelong learning system to cater for the demand of knowledge, skill and human resource in the Shanghai socio-economic development.' (SHMEC, 2006)

To understand this economic-oriented rationale for lifelong learning and a learning society, it is necessary to look at a number of interrelated socio-economic factors and their implications for education and training (Field, 1996), including the knowledge economy, globalization and technological innovation.

-- A global knowledge economy

According to the World Bank (2003, p.1), a knowledge-based economy is 'an economy in which knowledge is created, acquired, transmitted, and used more effectively by individuals, enterprises, organizations, and communities to promote economic and social development'. It depends primarily on ideas, technologies and innovations, and it is fundamentally different from economies based on natural resources, physical abilities or cheap labour (Duderstadt, 2002; World Bank, 2003).

Houghton and Sheehan (2000) point out that there are two defining forces leading to the emergence of a knowledge economy. One is growing knowledge intensification. It is influenced by the combined forces of information and communication technologies and those linked to biotechnology (Ashton and Green, 1996; Houghton and Sheehan, 2000; Haralambos *et al*, 2004). True, all economies, such as an agricultural economy and an industrial economy, are based on knowledge, but the degree of incorporation of knowledge and information into economic activity is now so great that it is inducing quite profound structural and qualitative changes in the operation of the economy (Houghton and Sheehan, 2000; World Bank, 2003). The application of technologies enables decreasing costs of manipulating, storing and transmitting information and improving the efficiency of economic activities. The other driving force behind a knowledge economy is increasing globalization. This is defined by Held *et al* (1999) as 'the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life'. There has been growth in economic interconnectedness within and among regions, albeit with multifaceted and uneven consequences across different communities; interregional and global competition in terms of politics, economy and culture, challenging old hierarchies and generating new inequalities of wealth, power, privilege and knowledge; an expansion of international

governance at regional and global levels – from the EU to the WTO; and increasing demands for new modes of thinking about politics, economics and cultural change (Ietto-Gillies, 2000; Held and McGrew, 2003).

-- Late modernity and risk society

A further theoretical perspective on recent social and economic development draws on the concept of ‘late modernity’ which Giddens (1990 and 1991) and Beck (1992 and 2000) refer to as ‘reflexive modernity’. Reflexive modernity is a risk culture, according to Giddens and Beck. It is characterized by the administration and distribution of different kinds of risks that are produced in and by the ongoing processes of social and economic development. On the one hand, Giddens and Beck do not deny the existence of risk in traditional societies. On the other hand, they argue that the concepts and extent of risk and uncertainties become qualitatively different, since the conditions under which these problems and values are shaped are changing drastically and so also are their forms and consequences (Jansen and van der Veen, 1996). People’s lives and the conditions in which they live become more unpredictable, varied and dynamic (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Harrison, 2000). For example, people may change work more frequently than ever before, not only with different employers but also in different fields of work.

There is another important feature in the discussion of ‘late modernity’; that is, individualization. Individuals become more self-responsible for their development and life chances in a risk society. It is also worth noting that risks and their consequences in reflexive modernity now have the potential to affect everybody irrespective of class, sex or age. Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) therefore argue that social inequality has been individualized and there is accordingly an increasing awareness of individualization and self-responsibility in the risk society of reflexive modernity. Also, Beck draws our attention to ‘an individualized society of employees’ (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004, p.88). However, Giddens’s and Beck’s arguments have been accused of being presented at a relatively general and abstract level and criticized for their relative lack of supportive empirical research and evidence (*ibid*).

-- The significance of socio-economic changes and education and training

The creation of a knowledge-based global economy comes along with profound socio-economic changes. These changes can be characterized as from labour-intensive production to knowledge-intensive production, from national competition to increasingly fierce international competition, from Fordism to post-Fordism and from a traditional society to a reflexive/late modern society. Brown and Lauder (1996), from another perspective, summarize these changes and significance of a knowledge-based global economy in terms of rules of eligibility, engagement and wealth creation.

Firstly, the contemporary social and economic transformation contains a change in the rules of eligibility. There has been a shift away from closed economies towards an open economy. The unprecedented levels of global interconnectedness lead to increasing cross-border social activities, such as world trade and cultural interaction (Ietto-Gillies, 2000; Held and McGrew, 2003). It also exposes domestic economies to increasing international competition (Reich, 1990), which in turn enhances the development of multinational corporations.

Secondly, there have been changes in the rules of engagement. The Keynesian mode, that is the engagement between government, employers and workers, has been broken down. Fordist rules have been replaced by the introduction of market rules, under which the nation-state plays the role of creating the conditions for a free market. Accordingly, influenced by the market rules of engagement, individual enterprises and workers need to take more self-responsibility and compete through their abilities to trade their skills and knowledge in a global market place.

Thirdly, the new rules of wealth creation denote that economic prosperity now depends on whether nations and companies are able to exploit the skills, knowledge and insights of workers to increase productivity (Brown and Lauder, 1996). Created, developed and applied knowledge becomes the main productive force and economic asset and lies at the centre of economic and social development (Aronowitz and De Fazio, 1994; Castells, 1997; World Bank, 2003). Industrial production is transformed from labour-intensive products to knowledge-intensive products, which will generate the most profits. Moreover, economic success also relies on the quality of goods and services, which features as one of the chief characteristics of post-Fordist production (Castells,

1997). In other words, it is a shift from a low-skill economy to an ever-increasing high-skill economy and a shift from low-skilled agricultural and production occupations to high-skilled professional, technical, administrative and managerial occupations (Ashton and Green, 1996; OECD, 1996; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Although this argument is challenged and criticized for its exaggerated emphasis on the rapid change in knowledge and skills required, it is accepted that whoever has full access to and good command of appropriate knowledge will be successful in the new 'knowledge society'. The industrial and occupational changes also lead to the demand for a high-performance workplace, which emphasizes self-managing teams, study circles, flexible job design, flat organizational structures, employee problem-solving groups, information and office technologies, just-in-time learning and production, the ability to meet customer needs, and innovation and total quality management (Brown and Lauder, 1996). Under these circumstances, people need to acquire the knowledge and skills considered as essential to meeting these priorities.

In sum, a modern economy and the creation of wealth require high levels of skills in the workforce to improve productivity. It is commonly accepted that productivity defines competitiveness for a nation, especially in relation to the national building of a high skill economy (Reich, 1990; Brown and Lauder, 1996; Castells, 1997; Aronowitz and De Fazio, 1994); meanwhile, it is also firmly believed that the development of human resources, skills and knowledge through education and training, i.e. lifelong learning in this research context, becomes the main weapon for national economic prosperity (Wolf, 2002; World Bank, 2003). On the one hand, education and training serve a role as both producer and supplier of skilled human capital to the national economy and industries. On the other hand, industries will employ a skilled workforce to achieve increased economic profit. Therefore, there is an interdependent relationship between education and the economy (Porter and Vidovich, 2000). Lifelong learning, continuing upgrading of work and life skills throughout life, has naturally become a dominant rhetoric in economic, political and educational policies, for expanding the education and training system and orienting it to competitiveness and employability (Griffin, 1999).

However, scholars such as Bagnall (2000), Rubenson (2002), Gouthro (2002), Avis (2002) and Coffield (1999a, 1999b), are right to remind us that this purely instrumental view of lifelong learning and the economy should be revisited. It ignores the

‘democratic imperative’ rationale and moral perspective of lifelong learning. Rather than being seen as a panacea, lifelong learning policy should be integrated with not only industrial strategies but also with a well-resourced, community-focused, anti-poverty strategy, so as to tackle issues of social exclusion and inequalities (Coffield, 1999b; Avis, 2002).

2.3.2 Lifelong learning for personal development and fulfilment: the personal development model

The personal development model of lifelong learning argues for ‘an increase in capacities to achieve individual self-fulfilment in all spheres of life, not just in economic activities’ (Rees and Bartlett, 1999, p.21) Bagnall (2000) relates the individual progressive rationale to lifelong learning’s programmatic commitment to individual growth and development. The ideological and philosophical emphases derive from the liberal view on education and training; that is, the purpose of learning is held to be the promotion of the well-being of the individual (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). As Bagnall (2000) summarizes it, the liberal commitments to lifelong learning seek to liberate individuals from ignorance through cognitive or intellectual development and understanding (commonly through academic disciplines); from dependence to developing and acquiring skills and socialising into social practices and life engagements; from constraints to transforming and transcending perspectives through which individuals inform and frame their understandings; and from inadequacy to developing and fostering individual potentials in terms of the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual abilities.

These ideas behind lifelong learning are by no means new. They can be traced back to Plato’s view and the American Philosopher J. Dewey’s perspective (Bagnall, 2000; Barrow and Keeney, 2001). Also, the Chinese philosopher and educationist, Confucius, had the same idea that a person needs to keep on learning; and learning, not restricted by personal or family background, will help the learner to be a ‘*better person*’ in terms of both his or her intellectual ability (*‘liang neng’*) and morality (*‘liang de’*). This liberal view of education emphasizes more on individual achievement, only indirectly framing a perception of public benefit from education (Bagnall, 2000).

Related to the current discourse of the risk society, the pervasive features of contemporary life have been described as insecure, uncertain, unpredictable influences of scientific and technological innovations and increasing individualization (Edwards, Ranson and Strain, 2002). More specifically, individuals may find increasing lack of security in jobs, the disappearance of a job for life, rapidly changing and updated knowledge and technologies, and in turn they need to become more self-responsible for planning and organising their jobs, lives and themselves (Jansen and Van der Veen, 1992). There is a need for individuals to be able to adapt themselves to meet the demands of ever changing worlds and cope with the changes they will inevitably experience (*ibid*). A capacity for reflexivity is required and can be achieved through learning. Learning, under these circumstances, is seen as an endless journey for personal development, to update knowledge and to cultivate generic skills, such as those of learning how to learn and critical thinking (Barrow and Keeney, 2001). Ultimately, learning throughout life should help people to improve the quality of their lives in the context of rapid change and globalization; to promote and enhance the autonomy and capability of the individual (Strain, 2000); and to develop a sense of self-worth and self-fulfilment (Barrow and Keeney, 2001).

However, those who advocate an individual approach towards lifelong learning may have underplayed certain issues, such as unequal access to learning opportunities (Keep, 1997). Research shows that individual motivations for learning are mediated by significant barriers, such as lack of money and time, no matter how positive the attitudes are that people hold towards learning (Keep, 1997; Gorard and Rees, 2002). Jansen and Van der Veen (1992) point out that the process of individualization in a risk society also has pitfalls. Individualization may be interpreted as meaning that life becomes more and more a private matter, neglecting and weakening the role of community. Also, the individualization process can gradually lead to the evolution of new forms of social inequality. This may consolidate already-existing social inequalities and weaken solidarity between different social groups. More emphasis needs to be put on the discussion of lifelong learning as an instrument for social development as well as that of personal development.

2.3.3 Lifelong learning for social justice, equity and social development: the social learning model

Rees and Bartlett (1999) define their third model of social learning as celebrating social capital (networks, communications and the strength of civil society), in addition to human capital, and it emphasizes 'the role of institutions of trust and cooperation in promoting economic growth on an equitable basis' (Rees and Bartlett, 1999; Coffield, 1999a). Social capital is considered as a role of the bonding constraint to the effective deployment of accumulated capital, skills and other resources in pursuit of economic growth (Putnam, 2000; Coffield, 1999a). This model of lifelong learning offers a more participative and community-based approach of learning. It also aims at building and developing a more humane, tolerant, just and egalitarian society through participative democratic involvement of individuals (Bagnall, 2000). Learning is seen as a public good in this educational model. It should not only help individuals' planning and organising of their own lives and employment, but also should encourage social action and inspire individual contribution to the development of society. Enjoying the capabilities of critical thinking and awareness of moral duty along with a wide range of other skills, citizens are required to judge whether society is just, to question and interrogate reflexively and to speak out in public (Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas, 2001). Cooperative relationships and mutual understanding between citizens are argued as providing the basis for generating and maximising human potential, improving the quality of life for the whole community and therefore ensuring intelligent and efficient action to attain shared goals and resolve common problems (Schuller and Bamford, 2000; Avis, 2002; Kilpatrick, Field and Falk, 2003). Lifelong learning is considered as a central process to bridging the social ties (Preston and Dyer, 2003).

The relationship between social capital and lifelong learning is by and large viewed as mutually beneficial, since the strength of social connectedness may shape general attitudes towards innovation and change, as well as determining the capacity of particular groups to survive and adapt to sudden changes in the external environment. Some empirical evidence shows that generally regular and positive association between general levels of interpersonal trust and participation in adult learning (Field, 2005). Thus, a better stock of social capital in a region or a community may lead to greater capacity for mutual learning and improvements in the quality of human capital (Field, 2006). However, the relationship between these two can also be negative to some extent.

For instance, Field and Spence (2000) and Field (2005, 2006) argue that strong community bonds might reinforce norms of low achievement; and reliance on informal mechanisms of information exchange might reduce the demand for more formal and systematic education and training.

In brief, these three models show that lifelong learning is both a public and a private good. Its development will lead to long-term benefits for the individual, the economy and society, as summarized by the OECD (1996):

- At the individual level: the emphases of lifelong learning are on an individual's creativity, initiative and responsiveness; the benefit of self-fulfilment; higher earning and better employment; and innovation and productivity.
- At the economic level: lifelong learning will enhance the positive relationship between educational attainment and economic growth (sustained development).
- At the societal level: lifelong learning can help to achieve equity, and reduce barriers and gaps, so as to maintain social cohesion and social stability. In other words, it breaks down the vicious circle of disadvantage and marginalization.

These three rationales have importantly informed, underpinned and shaped lifelong learning ideology and theory in the past four decades (Bagnall, 2000). These rationales are considered interrelated, rather than discrete or isolated from each other. Rubenson (2006) and Schuetze (2006) both categorize the development of lifelong learning into three generations or periods; that is,

- a humanistic tradition in the 1970s,
- an economic imperative tradition in the late 1980s, and
- a 'third way' approach for current development.

The different periods or generations have different combinations, thrusts and emphasis of the rationales discussed above. The individual and democratic rationale dominated in the first generation; and an economic rationale led the development in the second generation along with the advent of 'post-industrial society'. At the third stage of development, governments and organizations around the world seek to steer a course between 'a neo-liberal model and a social capitalist model' (Hodgson and Spours, 1999, in Hyland and Merrill, 2003). Third way politics, proposed by Giddens (1998), employs lifelong learning for the purposes of helping citizens pilot their way through the major

revolutions of our time and looks for a new relationship between the individual and the community. It also adopts explicit values, such as justice, fairness, and equality (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). The ultimate aim of third way politics is the 'social investment state', which 'defines equality as inclusion and inequality as exclusion' (Giddens, 1998, p102). However, the third way ideology has been criticized as merely the continuation of neo-liberal enterprise, but with social justice. Notwithstanding social democratic principles in the learning society policy, the responsibility for learning is heavily emphasized as individual rather than collective learning (Hyland, 2002). This criticism leads us to consider the fourth model of lifelong learning: social control.

2.3.4 A fourth model: lifelong learning for social control

This sceptical view of lifelong learning argues that lifelong learning has become a moral obligation and social constraint. The insights of lifelong learning become nothing but a form of social control (Tight, 1998; Coffield, 1999a, 1999b). If the previous three models are considered as consensus views, this social control model of lifelong learning derives from critiques of the consensus views.

From the perspective of governments and employers, policies on lifelong learning are used to make individual workers aware of the flexibility of learning as well as of the imperatives of employability (Coffield, 1999b). In other words, the rhetoric of lifelong learning is used as a means by government to encourage individuals to participate in learning, so as to be responsible for their own survival and adaptation in the rapidly changing world 'without promising them any job security' (Coffield, 1999a). The individual focus also reveals a hidden message of this policy: individual learners will be the ones to blame if they fail to learn (Keep, 1997).

From the individual perspective, workers have to take on full responsibilities to participate in learning, choose what to learn, bear an increasing proportion of learning investment. However, individual learners are constrained by structural barriers to participation in lifelong learning, which leads to or maintains existing unequal access to education and training (Keep, 1997). With little external intervention to change pre-existing societal inequalities and limited ability of individuals to improve their situation, the gap between those who can access to education and training provision and those who can not remains. Individuals who can access learning opportunities and tend to do

well out of the current situation might ensure current advantage and stay ahead of the competition for good jobs. It further limits supply and access to good-quality education and training (*ibid*). Here, lifelong learning plays a role of a positional good to allocate educational resources, which will be discussed in the next section. This sceptical model breaks down the consensus views on lifelong learning. It also brings the attention to debates and controversy on policies of lifelong learning and a learning society (Coffield, 1999a, 1999b).

Different orientations and criticism of developing lifelong learning and a learning society also indicate two competing broad theoretical positions which try to explain the role of education in society.

2.4 The role of education: two competing theoretical positions

The role of education and training in both national economic development and individual prosperity has been a focus of contention and debate. The significant relationship between education and national economy has constantly been emphasized throughout the twentieth century (Halsey *et al*, 1997). In particular, the post-war period of economic nationalism witnessed the development of human capital theory. The relationship between education and economy is still emphasized, although the economic and social contexts have changed significantly with the advent of the knowledge economy, globalization, post-Fordist forms of production and late modernity (Moore, 2004). The basic tenets of human capital theory are, however, a subject of dispute. At a macro-level, it is argued whether education is primarily a source of socioeconomic development and individual life chances or whether education is an arena for exploitation of class advantage as a means of social control and reproduction. At an individual level, questions are put forward as to whether education is for self-development or to gain employment. There are two competing broad theoretical positions that try to explain the relationships between education, credentials, income and economic productivity, namely, Consensus theory and Conflict theory.

‘Consensus theory’ is in fact a collection of theories oriented toward sociology of ‘regulation’ because human needs can be best realized within any given form of society through a process of progressive changes. Regulations can be considered as norms,

values and rules legitimated and widely accepted by the society or a given type of society (Morrow and Torres, 1995). In other words, consensus theory places emphasis on maintenance, continuation and progress of social order and social stability. In contrast, conflict theory assumes that ‘every existing form of society is to a greater or less degree a system of domination and exploitation that constrains and limits human possibilities. It focuses on conflict and what causes conflict within a particular society’ (*ibid*, p.30). With respect to education, consensus and conflict theories take different approaches to argue the significant relationships between education, society and economy.

2.4.1 The significant relationships between global economy and education: a consensus view

The consensus approach contains a range of compatible theories and ideas. Three theoretical stances of relevance to this thesis are modernization theory, functionalism and human capital theory. Related to education, consensus views state a tightening bond between education, credentials, income and productivity as a means of promoting social progress. Contemporary socioeconomic change also adds a further set of assumptions about the links between education and global competition. In essence, this approach reflects the logic of industrialism, rather than capitalism (Moore, 2004).

-- *Modernization theory*

Modernization theory argues that technological innovation is to be considered as the driving force behind social change and evolution. With the advent of advanced information and communication technologies, there is an increase in professional and managerial occupations and jobs, which is accordingly accompanied by a growing demand for a higher skilled workforce. This skilled workforce increasingly becomes more involved in planning and organising their own work, and increasingly forms a professional class (Livingstone, 1999a). The competitive advantages of nation states as well as companies will depend on technological innovation, applied knowledge and the intellectual capital of a highly skilled workforce (Brown, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). The more developed a society becomes, the greater the demand for technical, scientific and professional workers. However, this analysis has been questioned. Livingstone (1999a, 1999b) argues that, although there is a substantial change in the composition of the employed workforce, the notion of ‘knowledge economy’ and the

theory of modernization are uncritically used and their impact in practice is exaggerated. For example, there are still a large number of low-skilled jobs existing, especially certain service jobs; and few people will probably get secure, highly-skilled employment (Keep, 2000; Brown and Lauder, 2003). In Livingstone's view, the emergence of a 'knowledge economy' is slow and patchy rather than being a sudden and radical change in the mode of production and social relations.

-- Functionalism

Consensus views are also consonant with functionalist sociological theories. Broadly, functionalism is defined as 'a type of social theory which explains a social phenomenon in terms of its contribution to the operations of a larger social phenomenon, institution or society' (Saha and Zubrzycki, 1997). As a consensus perspective, functionalism examines the function of a certain institution, and its relationship with other social institutions. Functionalist tradition states education has important functions for society and economy, i.e. socializing all the members into society, responding to changing economic needs, educating the workforce (Durkheim, 1956, in Saha and Zubrzycki, 1997; Turner and Mitchell, 1997). This view of functionalism argues that the greater investment in and expansion of tertiary education reflects an exponential increase in the growth of scientific and technical knowledge and demand for high skilled knowledge workers required in today's economy (Brown *et al*, 2001; Brown, 2003). In other words, the rise in the level of educational qualifications demanded by the labour market reflects the cognitive upgrading of high-skill jobs which demand more education (Halsey *et al*, 1997).

From a functionalist perspective, education has a key role in the development of a meritocracy (Moore, 2004). Through the education system, talented people will be selected, developed and allocated to the workforce on the basis of their 'merit', without regard to their social background. In that case, no human capital, the primary resource in the new global competition, will be wasted (Moore, 2004). It is a competition where the 'best' people will be given an opportunity in the competition according to their innate potential in comparison with others, rather than being a power struggle over access to education, credentials and jobs (Brown, 2003). Under this circumstance, inequalities in income and status reflect legitimate difference in talent, achievement and contribution, that is, the value of human capital; and the most talented people will be

motivated to engage in intensive and extensive periods of education and training (Davis and Moore, 1945, in Brown, 2003). Consequently, education is assumed to be the dominant factor in promoting social mobility and retaining social justice (Behrman and Taubman, 1997; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Moore, 2004). The main critique of this view of meritocratic competition comes from Marxism. It argues that education is not the only or the dominant factor determining people's life chances. This view will be extended later.

-- *Human capital theory*

Not until the 1960s was the importance of education formally related to skill and productivity, through the development of human capital theory. Human capital theory asserts quite simply that greater investment in education and training, both at an individual level and at a national level, will yield greater individual and societal economic return (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1971; Woodhall, 1987).

The distinctive feature of human capital theory can be summarized as (Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000): it describes individual economic capacities and assumes a linear relationship between education and productivity. It takes educational duration and qualification as the main indicators to measure the educational investments on the one hand and takes income, productivity, health and civic activity to measure direct and indirect outcomes on the other hand, to calculate or predict the rate of return to educational investment.

In more detail, several points can be deduced from the development of human capital theory. First, skills and knowledge form the new concept of capital, that is, human capital. Second, achievement of skills and knowledge are believed to result from systematic investment in education and training. Third, knowledge and skills are viewed as capacities that contribute to economic production (Little, 2003). Fourth, on an individual level, earnings in the labour market are considered as a means of rewarding a person's productivity (*ibid*). Therefore, related to the unprecedented competitive global economy, the policy appeal of investment in human capital will be irresistible to national governments around the world. It to some extent is believed to provide a win-win scenario. On the one hand, individuals gain greater employability and earning potentials by investing in their own education and training, which is seen as a skill and

knowledge supply side factor. On the other hand, the nation state, as the skill demand side, will achieve improvements in productivity and wealth creation. (Brown, 2001; Little, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Expenditure on education is conceived of as investment rather than mere consumption, since it raises the lifetime earnings of individual workers who are better educated and trained (Woodhall, 1987) and promotes national socioeconomic growth (Burbles and Torres, 2000).

From the perspective of human capital theory, education is viewed as both a private and a public good (Olssen *et al*, 2004). As a private good, education can be conceived of as a tradable asset in the market place for money, employment and status for individuals. Human capital theory assumes that individual investment in education and training reflects individual decision-making in response to economic incentives. Possessing full knowledge of the market, individuals will rationally undertake education and training to the extent that they are able to maximize their economic returns (Gorard and Rees, 2002). As a public good, education to some extent can develop the moral, ethical, social cultural and political awareness of all citizens, assist in the effective operation of the democratic process, and increase economic productivity (Woodhall, 1987). Also, according to Olssen *et al* (2004), the rapid changes in technology, economy and society since the 1980s have led to a renewed policy emphasis on investment in human capital adapted to a global free-market form.

Different aspects of human capital theory have been subjected to a variety of criticisms (Bowles and Gintis, 1975; Woodhall, 1987; Livingstone, 1997, 1999a; Coffield, 1999a; Fevre, Rees and Gorard, 1999; Brown, 2001; Little, 2003). Bowles and Gintis (1975) and Brown (2001) criticize human capital theory from both the supply and demand side. From the supply side, first, it is argued that the neo-liberal nature and the economic basis of the theory isolates further analyses of how skills are socially constructed (Brown, 2001). It ignores the fact that individual labour is embedded in social relations. In other words, the roles of other social factors in productive activities are underestimated.

Second, and related to the previous point, the origins of human capital theory in economics means that it treats individuals as purely rational actors. It ignores the influence of ethnicity, age, gender, social class and other social factors in motivating

and mediating people's participation in learning and training (Coffield, 1999b; Brown, 2001; Little, 2003). Also, Gorard and Rees (2002) argue that human capital theory ignores the possibility that individuals may pursue different ends which can be conceived of as reflecting different value positions. That is to say, individuals may take part in education and training simply for the sake of their own enjoyment or for other non-economic reasons, rather than calculating economic benefits.

A third criticism related to the supply side stems from screening theory and credentialism. Screening theory argues that education and educational qualifications have acted as 'a screening device'; and they enable employers to make an initial selection on the basis of qualifications, without necessarily acknowledging that these reflect productive capacity, though they may indicate the possession of other desirable attributes (Woodhall, 1987; Killeen *et al*, 1999; Quiggin, 1999). In other words, it is argued that individuals' academic experience and performance may not predict personal productivity; therefore, education, in addition to its role of imparting knowledge and skills, also affects personal attitudes, motivation and other attributes (Woodhall, 1987). A simplistic economic calculation may not be able to account for these complex processes.

From the demand side, the first criticism is related to market imperfection. Utilization of upgraded human resource requires the availability of the equivalent work. However, according to surveys carried out by Livingstone (1997, 1999a, 2003), Kivinen and Sakriahola (1999) and Wolbers (2003), there are always some 'mismatches' between employers' aggregate demand and requirements for employees on the one hand, and the aggregate supply and qualifications of job seekers on the other. The researches show that the extent of human resource upgrading tends to be more than that of the actual demand in the market. This easily leads to the situations of credential inflation and an under-utilized or over-educated labour force (Hirsch, 1977; Brown, 2001).

Apart from the criticisms mentioned above, methodological criticism concerns the limits of the theory in terms of the techniques, data reliability and an exaggerated reporting of the result of rates of return analysis. This criticism also indicates that human capital theory has a potential problem of predominantly emphasizing the direct economic benefit of investment in education to both individuals and societies, at the

expense of ignoring indirect benefits, such as family health, fertility and child morality (Lewin *et al*, 1983, in Little, 2003; Woodhall, 2001).

-- Relating to participation in lifelong learning

In sum, from the consensus theory point of view, especially from the perspective of human capital theory, lifelong learning, a form of education and training, is regarded as an up-front investment which leads to increasing rates of economic returns to both the participating individuals and society in general. Individuals will be expected to be continually updating skills and knowledge, thereby increasing their productivity and raising or maximizing their economic returns. An aggregation of the benefits to the individuals leads to those of society (Jenkins *et al*, 2002; Hartley, 2003). This expectation is based on the assumption that individual participation in lifelong learning is a rational decision made after an economic calculation. This assumption is also argued to be set up in the condition that people in the society, as free actors to make their choices, has equal opportunity and access to education and training. In other words, this technical-function theoretical framework may miss out considerations of serious inequality of education and employment opportunities in society, as identified by neo-Weberian conflict theorists (Collins, 1979; Hartley, 2003).

2.4.2 Conflict perspective: positional competition theory

Conflict theory can be defined as a group of theories and explanations of social structure and changes. Rooted in Marxist and Weberian sociological arguments, it asserts that individuals and individual behaviour, such as participation in education and training, are not totally independent of but are constrained by a wide range of social structures, such as gender, social class, culture and social rules. It argues that different social groups pursue their interests in conflict with others and according to their available resources for social organization. Individuals' desires, preferences and decision making depend on the behaviour and wellbeing of others (Adnett and Davies, 2002). This is the starting point for positional competition theory.

-- Positional Competition Theory

Positional competition for scarce goods is one of the important components or assumptions in conflict theory (Turner and Mitchell, 1997). Hirsch (1977) refers positional competition to how one seeks his or her position relative to others' within an

implicit or explicit hierarchical order. It is argued that each individual seeks to establish, maintain and maximize his or her position and advantages, so as to make sure of staying ahead of others. Related to education, conflict theory refutes its counterpart consensus traditions on the significant relationships between education, society and economy. Brown (2000, 2003) specifies the notion as ‘positional conflict theory’, to understand how the dynamics of education revolve around, and are implicated in, the unequal distribution of resources among different social groups; how different social groups mobilize their economic, cultural, political or social assets to stay ahead in positional power struggles. The basic principle behind this competition is scarcity or exclusivity (*ibid*), which is in accordance with economic orthodoxy. Economic theory states that the value of a good depends on the relative amounts of demand and supply. The more it is provided, the less the good is demanded, and accordingly, the less the value has; and the vice versa. In other words, a general leveling-up or advancement of standards for all does not serve the interest of all groups.

Two key elements within positional competition theory are those of rigging the market and ranking in the market (Brown, 1995, 2000; Brown and Lauder, 2003). Rigging the market denotes the power to influence the market. This concept derives from Weber’s writings on social closure (Parkin, 1979, in Brown, 2000); that is, individual competitors, or groups of competitors will try to control capital and mobilize power in order to enhance or defend their share of resources. Restricting others’ access will enhance and reinforce those powerful groups. The second element is ranking in the market. This aspect focuses on how individuals experience positional competition, and how they are able to capitalize on their educational, cultural and social assets in the employment competition. Rigging the market and ranking in the market are not exclusive to each other. Rather, to understand both elements can be conducive to developing a comprehensive theory of the social structure of competition.

Positional conflict theory contains a set of key interrelated processes which should be considered within the dynamic of educational and social change, such as the duality of education value, credentialism, and educational expansion (Moore, 2004).

The argument of the duality of education value can be seen as the starting point of positional conflict theory. Hirsch (1977) proposes two dimensions of educational quality, that is, an absolute dimension, e.g. good teaching resources, and a relative

dimension, i.e. the differential over the educational level attained by others. Adopting Hirsch's view, Brown (2003) extends the argument to the duality of education value. The absolute dimension refers to 'the performance imperatives of individual, institutions or societies' (p.114). The only way to achieve increasing value is to improve teaching and learning, raising productivity, profit margins or increasing economic growth. The positional imperatives refer to 'relative performance, to how one stands compared to others within an implicit or explicit hierarchy' (Hirsch, 1977; Brown, 2003, p.144). Within this dimension, the critical elements include reputational capital and competitiveness. This leads to the argument that education plays a role of screening or filtering (Hirsch, 1977; Collins, 1979; Brown, 2003).

The 'screening' role of education denotes that educational attainment, commonly coded in educational qualifications, is used as a means of narrowing down the field of applicants in the labour market. Employers will believe and judge applicants' ability through the information implied by the credentials they have. In other words, credentials are used as currencies of opportunity for livelihood competition. People tend to and are encouraged to invest more time and effort in getting themselves qualified for jobs, which is accompanied by the situation that more and more job positions require certain entry qualifications. This leads to the argument of credentialism.

Credentials, an element of power, have been widely seen as a positional good in education and labour markets (Keep, 1997; Fevre, Rees and Gorard, 1999; Warmington, 2003; Young, 2003; Little, 2005). From the perspective of positional conflict theory, the expansion of higher education is not seen as a response to the increasing demand for high-skilled workers, but as a result of the pressure of credential inflation (Collins, 1979; Moore, 2004). Based on the principles of supply and demand, the more people gain a qualification, the less its value as educational currency, and the less useful and valuable it becomes in the screening of candidates by employers. The first direct outcome is that employees lose their power in negotiating with employers in terms of their working conditions, incomes and social status, or rather weakening exchange value. On the contrary, it brings more power to the employers' side. Employers can decide whether to lift entry requirements, or further differentiate qualifications in terms of other factors, such as the rankings of universities or the countries where the degree is obtained. Alternatively, employers may also extend their recruitment criteria in terms of other

skills, e.g. interpersonal skills (Brown and Scase, 1994). Second, an increased supply of a given educational credential stimulates a further round of positional competition at a higher level of credentials (Killeen *et al*, 1999). It can be predicted that students will start to seek alternative or extra education and training with a higher-status qualification, to ensure and attain their status quo in the competition (Collins, 1979). This reveals the ceaseless nature of positional competition. Here, credential inflation is argued to have the potential to reproduce and reinforce inequalities in opportunity, since middle class families, with their personal and family resources, are more likely to be able to afford the costs of the extended competition (Hirsch, 1977). This may not guarantee success; it will, however, expand their chances of a high ranking in the market (Brown, 2003). There might also be a danger of greater inequality and a larger gap between those elite groups with rigging power and those who have not, especially in the marketized mechanism.

To sum up, rejecting the consensus view, the positional conflict approach argues that education plays a role of a screening device, reflecting a power struggle between different interest groups. It tries to explain how different social groups deploy different strategies in the livelihood competition. Rather than the win-win scenario proposed in consensus views, the positional conflict approach sees the competition as zero-sum, that is, winner takes it all. Furthermore, this approach also maintains that positional competition and positional advantages may be different in different social contexts, as each individual society will have its own ideology, culture and value system. Also, the nature of positional competition will change over time as other social, economic and political changes take place. Finally, this theoretical framework indicates that education, as a screening device for employment, will affect people's attitudes and motivations to participate in education and learning (Dore, 1976; Keep, 1997; Adnett and Davies, 2002; Ahl, 2006). The main critique of the positional conflict approach in explaining the development of lifelong learning emphasizes that the role of education as self-fulfilment receives little attention. Its focus is exclusively on the instrumental role of education or rather credentials in reproducing social exclusion (Preston, 1999).

-- Relating to participation in lifelong learning

From the perspective of positional conflict theory, lifelong learning is seen as extra education and training opportunities for an individual or social group to mobilize power

in order to defend or enhance their labour market chances (Fevre *et al*, 1999; Brown, 2003). People who can afford the cost of the extra education and training will utilize their resources to keep themselves ahead in the competition. In this situation, individuals may decide to participate in lifelong learning in order to stand out or be filtered out from the other applicants for certain jobs, rather than thinking about, let alone emphasising, the skills or experience required at work. Under the circumstance of credential inflation, gaining more certificates or qualifications may not guarantee the holders will win the competition for livelihood. However, if individuals do not have the qualification, they will certainly become the losers in this competition (Brown, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Fevre *et al* (1999) argue that individuals' decisions should be considered as rational, not only when they act as the rational egoists envisaged by human capital theory, but also when individuals' calculation and decision-making implies the notion of positional goods. In addition, it is found in some research that individuals' decision-making over participation in lifelong learning is also structured or constrained by other social factors, such as previous educational attainment, social class, locality, time, gender and other social structural factors. Sargant and Aldridge (2002) find that among lifelong learning participants over half of all upper and middle-class respondents are current or recent learners, compared with only one quarter of those from unskilled working class backgrounds. Beinart and Smith (1998, in Coffield, 2000b) argue from their research findings that non-participation in any forms of lifelong learning is mediated by people's financial situation, other family circumstances and previous learning or employment experience. This is also supported by the research findings of Rees *et al* (2000). Davies and Bynner (2000) identify that one of the participation patterns is motivated by employers. The more education and training opportunities are provided through employment, the more likely employees are to participate and progress further. However, Vignoles *et al*'s (2004) quantitative studies show that, not rejecting the positive role of work-related education and on-the-job training especially related to individual earning, employers tend to train those workers who are more able or have higher qualifications in the first place (Vignoles *et al*, 2004). This leaves the poorly skilled worker even further behind, and accordingly further limits their opportunities in the competition for livelihood.

Taking both sides of the story into consideration, namely, consensus views and conflict views, we can argue that decision-making and participation in lifelong learning is a

complex process which involves multi-faceted factors and reasons (Sargant, 1997; Fevre *et al*, 1999; Gorard *et al*, 2002). Rather than focusing or over-relying on the theoretical perspective, we may need a holistic analysis of these factors at both structural and individual level to understand people's decision-making process. In relation to this research, an individual perspective can give us some understanding of the nature and practice of competition as experienced in their lives. Their insightful stories show how individuals exert their agency and design their strategies of employability construction and learning management in this newly competitive Shanghai labour market. At the same time, from a structural level, this individual competition and agency take place in a context of rules, boundaries and barriers which may variously enable, inhibit or exclude the human actions. These structural forces will act differentially according to individual agents' positions in relation to them. For example, people's life chances can be constrained by their educational background and the *hukou* they possessed, which will in turn be related to family socio-economic status. Whether the candidate holds an elite university degree can decide his or her access to job interviews; and migrants without a Shanghai *hukou* may have limited access to schooling in the city (Wang, 2008). However, compared with some western societies where class structures have been deeply rooted, the contemporary impact of exclusion mechanisms may be limited in China, particularly in the context of Shanghai, as the rapidly growing economy and expanding labour market have been creating opportunities at a rate that leaves room for upward mobility. Therefore, a full understanding of individuals' work and learning involves an analysis that integrates both individual and structural factors. Theoretical frameworks to analyze individual participation in lifelong learning will be reviewed in Chapter 3.

2.5 Employability and different forms of capital

These two competing theoretical positions on explaining the role of education also offer implications for the concept of 'employability'. This research focuses on the relationship between individual participation in lifelong learning and their experience in the labour market. So, it allows a space to review this notion, particularly in relation to consensus and conflict views.

2.5.1 Employability

Hillage and Pollard (1998) provide a 'common sense' definition of employability as 'the capability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment and to obtain new employment if required'. In their work on how university graduates managed their employability in the competition for managerial jobs in large multi-national companies, however, Brown and Hesketh (2004) propose a more complex model of a duality of employability, namely, an absolute dimension and a relative dimension. Here, this notion is redefined specifically in relation to two competing theoretical perspectives on the relationships between education, jobs and reward in the knowledge-based economy: a consensus perspective and one based on notions of positional competition or conflict.

From the consensus position, the absolute dimension of employability refers to individual achievement in terms of knowledge and technical skills, which ensure that individuals have the right skill sets to match the requirements of employers. In the 'knowledge wars', the talents and achievements of individuals become the source of individual and national prosperity and become essential to winning a global competition for jobs (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). This absolute dimension of employability can be questioned due to its optimistic interpretation of this global competition. It ignores the fact that the supply of knowledge work does not always match the available jobs. It also ignores the fact that the power of individuals and social groups is differentially distributed in the labour market. Employable candidates may not have equal access to job opportunities, which leaves them unable to find suitable work. That is to say, being *employable* does not equate to being *employed* (ibid). Focusing on the structure of occupational opportunity, Brown and Hesketh redefine the notion of individual 'employability' in positional conflict terms as 'the relative chances of getting and maintaining different kinds of employment' (ibid, p.25).

In relation to these consensus and conflict positions, Brown and Hesketh (2004, p.9 and p.126) identify two 'ideal type' ways in which people understand and manage their employability, namely, as purists and players. 'Purists' believe that employment and competition in the labour market is a meritocratic race: differences in individual achievement reflect innate capabilities and effort. Securing a winning position in the competition means that individuals need to possess the right skills and knowledge to meet the employers' demands. 'Players', however, understand employability as a

positional game, based on market competition rules. That is, realizing that they are competing with other qualified competitors, ‘players’ ensure they study careers information and assess their position in the market place, so as to market and sell themselves in ways conforming to the employers’ requirements. To be the ‘right’ person, ‘players’ try to get access to elite training, add value to their resume and by studying how to answer difficult questions in interviews and other contemporary forms of assessment. Brown and Hesketh (2004) find that, in practice, many people are somewhere between these two ideal-types: their comments reflect elements in both stances. Moreover, people’s construction of understanding and managing their employability is an ongoing social process, interacting with their experience over the course of their life; people may change their competition tactics at different stages of their careers.

To sum up, the duality of employability shows that employability not only depends on whether individuals accumulate assets, in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, and whether an individual is able to fulfill the specific job requirements; but also depends on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers, and how one presents and deploys one’s assets to ensure a dominant position in that hierarchy (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

2.5.2 Personal capital

Brown and Hesketh (2004, p.34) use the notion of ‘personal capital’, almost as a synonym for employability, to refer to the extent the self can be packaged to capitalize on those personal qualities valued by employers. This notion, it is argued, inevitably arises in legitimate recruitment decisions in the context of higher education expansion, as more and more people acquire university degrees which were previously attained by a small minority. There are four components which socially construct personal capital: ‘hard currencies’, ‘soft currencies’, the narratives of employability and the ‘self’ (ibid, p.35).

‘Hard currencies’ include credentials, work experience, and subject- and occupation-specific knowledge and skills (Tamkin and Hillage, 1999). Although the value of a university degree decreases in the context of mass higher education, credentials are not abandoned in the screening of graduates from particular levels of the degree and from

particular institutions. ‘Soft currencies’ of employability include interpersonal skills and personal attributes (such as communication skills, self-reliance, initiative and motivation), as charismatic qualities represent changing forms of symbolic control in knowledge intensive organizations and become part of the explicit criteria of management competence (Brown and Scase, 1994; Brown, 1995; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Instead of solely focusing on credentials, personal qualities for managerial and leadership roles, or rather the ‘whole’ person, are more valued.

It is argued that the notion of personal capital amounts to more than ‘credentials plus key skills’ and does not stop here. Its value also depends on how people exploit their assets, present, market and sell them (Tamkin and Hillage, 1999); described as ‘a narrative of employability’ by Brown and Hesketh (2004). The fourth component of personal capital is the ‘self’. Factors such as family, gender and ethnicity, tend to position people differently in the competition for credentials, access to cultural practice and ultimately, employment. In spite of its consideration of the ‘economy of experience’, the definition of personal capital and employability discussed here is different from the technocratic views of human capital theory, because the individual self and social construction of identity are integrated into the analysis and issues of power and conflict are taken into consideration in the account of personal capital (ibid).

Here, other sociologists’ work, such as that of Bourdieu on forms of capital, needs to be incorporated to understand the insights of how individuals and competing interest group fare a ceaseless competition.

2.5.3 Bourdieu’s work on different forms of capital

Bourdieu’s work has been considered as making a significant contribution in demonstrating how the middle classes reproduce their competitive advantages and so maintain their social status. Challenging economic theory’s narrow understanding of capital as economic capital, Bourdieu (1986) proposes that narrow economic forms reduce exchange to merely monetary exchange aimed at self-interest maximization. All other non-economic forms of capital are thus ignored. In addition to economic capital, Bourdieu identifies cultural capital and social capital. It is argued that in power struggles these three forms of capitals work together more specifically, in the competition for education and employment.

Cultural capital is identified in three sub-forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). First, cultural capital is embodied in individuals, inherited and acquired either consciously or subconsciously, in forms such as manner and linguistic capability. Second, in its objectified state, cultural capital can be seen as material objects, such as books and paintings. Objectified cultural goods are transmissible in both a material and a symbolic form. That is to say, the ownership of the cultural goods can be possessed through conversion with economic capital; however, whether the owner understands its innate meaning depends on his or her embodied cultural competence. The third type of cultural capital, in its institutionalized state, is generally understood as academic qualifications and experience. Academic experience and qualifications are a certificate of cultural competence and have certain legally guaranteed value (Bourdieu, 1986). Meanwhile, their symbolic value also depends on public or official recognition and their scarcity (ibid).

Bourdieu (ibid, p.51) defines social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationship of mutual acquaintance and recognition’. This notion essentially deals with social networks, relationships and connections (Moore, 2004). According to Bourdieu (1986), the value and volume of the social capital possessed by an actor depends on the size of the network that he can mobilize. Its value and volume is also related to the sum of cultural and economic capital one possesses. The production and reproduction of social capital, based on membership principle, requires ‘an unceasing effort of sociability, a constant series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed’ (ibid, p.52). To Bourdieu, the idea of social capital, along with economic and cultural capital, provides insights into the process of capital accumulation and social reproduction (O’Brien and Fathaigh, 2005).

Coleman (1988) and Putman (1993) provide another two foundational views of social capital as social networks of trust, solidarity and reciprocity, and as a community asset. Although their interpretation of social capital different from that of Bourdieu, certain common ground exists among them. For example, both Coleman and Bourdieu argue that social capital is convertible into other forms of capital. Bourdieu’s work emphasizes structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources based on

class, ethnicity and gender, whereas Coleman's work explains how the family is responsible for adopting certain norms to advance children's life chances (Dika and Singh, 2002). Both these sociologists develop their theories as alternative to human capital theory (Halpern, 2005). In relation to this research context in China, social capital has been generally translated as '*guanxi*'. It is argued that *guanxi* and social capital are analogous to and overlapping with each other; and the concept of *guanxi* plays a central role in almost every aspect of Chinese social life (Bian 1994; Yang, 1994; Gold, *et al*, 2002; Huang, 2003). The next section will discuss this notion in more detail.

In his thesis on different forms of capital, Bourdieu (1986) argues that the three forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) are convertible to each other. For example, a middle-class family can convert their economic capital into cultural and social capital by ensuring their children receive private education and obtain elite qualifications. As later on the value of children's education and qualification is recognized in the labour market, further economic return to some extent will be earned. Thus, these three forms of capital work together in class formation, which decides individuals' positions in the labour market competition.

Bourdieu's approach has been subjected to some critique. First, although his aim is to strike a balance between economism and non-economic, analytical content of the capital thesis, Bourdieu's work is still questioned for its chaotic concept of capital itself and a metaphorical slippage into reductionism to the economic (Fine, 2001). Also, Bourdieu attempts to resolve the relationship between structure and agency by proposing the concept of 'field' and 'habitus'. He demonstrates how people's experience and actions reflect and are constrained by wider social and cultural inequalities. These inequalities privilege the dominant class while restricting the disadvantaged group people from overcoming them (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). In this sense, it is still debatable whether Bourdieu's work is mechanistic, structural and not paying enough attention to the complex interaction between structure and human agency.

2.5.4 *Guanxi* capital in the Chinese context

Lying at the heart of China's social order, economic structure and its changing institutional landscape, *guanxi* is considered as the most important phenomenon in almost every realm of life (Yang, 1994; Gold, *et al*, 2002). Knight and Yueh (2002)

argue that the Chinese featured notion is thought, in particular, to play a pertinent role in the labour market in transition. Understanding this notion along with other related concepts, such as '*renqin*', may help us to paint a fuller picture of competition for positional advantages in the Chinese transitive labour market.

Guanxi in Chinese literally means 'relationship'. However, in the Chinese language, *guanxi* has several different meanings. Apart from the most general sense of 'relationship', this term refers to a subset of relationships and networks that work according to rules of reciprocity (Bian, 1994; Huang, 2003). Also, according to Xinci Xinyu Cidian (New Words and New Phrases Dictionary, 1989; in Huang, 2003), *guanxi* is defined as 'the use of someone's authority to obtain political or economic benefits by unethical persons'.

Although some researchers see *guanxi* capital as a Chinese variant of the western concept of 'social capital' (Knight and Yeuh, 2002), Huang (2003) points out essential differences between the two. *Guanxi* capital is based on interpersonal or special trust and functions only within the realm of private benefits; while social capital is based on institutional or generalized trust and involves both private benefits and public goods. Huang (2003) also presents a fuller concept of *guanxi*, which consists of three main points: personal relationship, the use of personal relationship, and obligation and reciprocity in exchange. Firstly, the precondition of this notion is the existence of personal relationships. According to the Confucian thesis, the Chinese social system is characterized by 'dyadic ties between individuals'; and an individual is defined as 'a social and interactive being' (ibid, p.10). Relationships are categorized by Chinese people being divided into different types, such as insiders and outsiders, family, friends and colleagues, etc. Also, different categories of personal relationship contain different social, psychological and affective meanings to the parties and peoples involved. In addition to the concept of *guanxi*, Knight and Yueh (2002) identify another special factor as a substantial source for *guanxi* capital, that is, Communist Party membership (more specifically, parental party membership of the Party). Secondly, the use of *guanxi* is instrumental in nature. That is to say, the personal relationship serves as a means or an instrument to attain other goals.

Thirdly, the practice of *guanxi* is based on the norm of reciprocity and trustworthiness (Huang, 2003; Cai and Wheale, 2004). That is, people cultivate their social investment by doing favours for others; favours can be banked, with people clearly expecting other favours in return. The ‘favour’ and ‘return’ can be either in material form, such as gift, or in other intangible forms, such as job opportunities or business information (Yang, 1994). The return of the favour is called the rule of ‘*renqing*’.

In spite of its complex multifaceted definition, *guanxi* has been seen as an ‘operational code’ to explain and analyze social life and economic transaction in China (Knight and Yueh, 2002). Focusing mainly on business relations and employment in recent research, scholars have attributed some strengths of *guanxi*. In Bian’s (1994) and Knight and Yueh’s (2002) research, it is concluded that *guanxi* plays a significant and substantial role in employment processes. For example, personal relationships can benefit individuals by allowing access to internally circulated information on jobs, to obtain influence from senior management to initiate an assignment or grant a job position, to obtain promotion and to raise income of employed persons. Furthermore, Knight and Yueh’s (2002) research finds that social capital, as *guanxi*, plays an even more important role for labour market entrants. On the one hand, it is argued that the strength of *guanxi* may stem from the lack of a comprehensive legal structure in China (Yang, 1994; Knight and Yueh, 2002). However, on the other hand, Guthrie (1998) assumes that the role of *guanxi* may occupy a diminishing role in China’s urban industrial economy as the economic transition progresses and rational-legal system is being constructed in the China.

2.6 Summary

In this chapter, the notions of lifelong learning, a learning society and employability have been reviewed. Different policy contexts and the theoretical rationales underpinning the notions have also been reviewed. It is important to note that this chapter has only focused on the socio-economic theories and factors related to lifelong learning and competition in the labour market. Billett (2006), Field (2006) and Warren and Webb (2006) argue that both social and individual factors interact and impact on each other in social changes. The socio-economic changes which drive the silent explosion in lifelong learning are only part of the story. According to Giddens (1991)

and Beck (1992), reflexivity, as a central component of late modernity, maintains that individuals and institutions are required to reflect upon what they know in order to make their choices about who they are and how they behave. Thus, beyond understanding the policy and the social or institutional facts that shape learning, another level of analysis on lifelong learning is also required, -- individuals who are socially derived constructs of what is experienced within daily life (Billett, 2006; Field, 2006). The next chapter will review theoretical framework(s) on learners' participation in lifelong learning: how learners engage in learning and work in the context of social and economic transformations, how learners constitute their identities by employing resources – social, cultural and economic - and whether the strategic decisions on participation in education and training are part of a reflexive project between individual and structural change.

Chapter 3 Some Preliminary Theoretical Explanation on Understanding Individuals' Participation in Lifelong Learning

3.1 Introduction

This research focuses on individuals' participation in lifelong learning in Shanghai, their experience in the newly-emerged labour market competition and how best to understand the relationships between these two aspects. The research has significance not only for any contribution that it may make to theoretical development by examining theory in a Chinese context but also for possible policy implications in building a learning society in Shanghai. Coffield (1997), echoed by Gorard and Rees (2002), argues that the development of an adequate social theory of lifelong learning is a necessary pre-condition to understanding and creating a learning society:

'We need a more powerful social theory of learning which will encompass not only the cognitive processes within the heads of individuals but also the social relationships and arrangements which stimulate learning.' (Coffield, 1997, p.9; in Rees, *et al*, 2006)

In the previous chapter, the notions of lifelong learning and a learning society are reviewed in relation to the contemporary policy discourse, especially related to the economic imperative discourse – a global knowledge economy and risk society. The rationales for the development of lifelong learning and the theoretical underpinnings were also reviewed. Also, the previous literature review chapter indicates that the current learning culture and environment places individuals in the centre, to play a key role in maintaining and improving both their own employability and a country's competitiveness (Harrison, 2000). Individuals, responsible learners, are considered as the most efficient form of 'human resource' in this context and are required to self-steer and be capable of learning and responding to rapid and frequent changes in the world of work (Field, 2006).

This chapter will present some theoretical models and explanations of individuals' decision-making to participate in lifelong learning that will be used to analyze empirical

data in this research. It will start with a discussion on what factors constitute an adequate social theory of lifelong learning. This discussion will lead to two popular theoretical frameworks for analyzing individuals' decision-making in sociology, namely, rational choice theory and learner identity.

3.2 An adequate social theory of lifelong

Participation in lifelong learning is a complex process, which requires an adequate social theory to help us explain and understand it (Coffield, 1997; Sargant, 1997; Fevre *et al*, 1999; Gorard and Rees, 2002). Individual participation in lifelong learning, as a type of individual behaviour, is embedded in a system of social relations (Gorard and Rees, 2002). Social relations at the same time are also shaped by social norms, interpersonal relationships and so forth. To understand individuals' participation we need to trace out and analyze the interaction between structural forces and individual action, rather than simply dividing the determinants of participation into structure and individual (*ibid*).

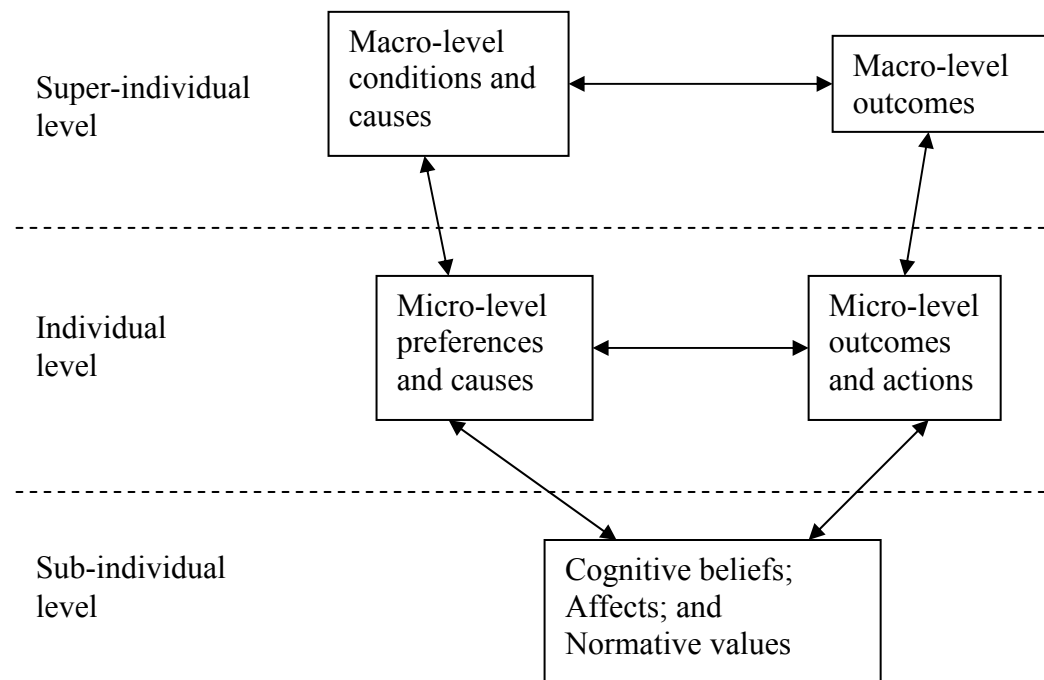
According to Weber (1947, in Abell, 2000), the aim of social science is to achieve an interpretive understanding of social action 'in order to arrive at causal explanation of its cause and effects'. In this sense, the relationship between systemic- and individual-level factors has become one of the most important theoretical issues or debates in sociology. Although Coleman and Fararo (1992) argue that there is little wholly satisfactory sociological theory to simultaneously meet the criteria and explain all the transitive relationships, different sociologists have endeavored to fill this theoretical gap, through approaches such as structural-functionalism, epitomized by the work of Parsons, structuration theory by Giddens, or habitus-field by Bourdieu. Most of these theoretical stances indicate that emergent social phenomena are mutual dynamic interactions between individual actions and structural macro forces. For example, in his structuration theory, Giddens aims at bridging the cleavage between functionalism/structuralism and individualism. This structuration theory argues that neither action nor structures can exist independently; and structure, on the one hand, influences and constrains action, while on the other hand, is created and reconstituted from social action (Layder, 1994; Rose and Scheeper, 2001; Holborn and Haralambos, 2004).

In short, a satisfactory social theory must encompass transitions between the level of social structure and the level of individual behaviour as Coleman (1990) points out. According to Coleman and Fararo (1992), one of the criteria for judging such a social theory is the extent to which it encompasses transitions between the level of social structure and the level of individual behaviour. According to Abell (2000), there are four generic types of causal relationship in sociology, each of which may 'require theoretical treatment' (Abell, 2000, see Figure 3.2):

- Macro-level relationships: how macro causes lead to macro outcomes;
- Macro-level to individual-level: how macro causes affect individual causes;
- Micro-level relationships: how individual causes lead to individual purposive actions; and
- Micro-level to macro-level relationships: how individual actions lead to macro outcomes.

Whereas Coleman identifies two levels of analysis, Abell (1992) also argues that there are three levels of puzzling empirical relationship in sociology, namely, super-individual level (systemic level conditions and outcomes), individual level (individual preferences and actions), and sub-individual level (individual cognitive beliefs, affects and normative values) (also see Figure 3.2). These three levels can be considered transitively related to each other, with individual action lying at the very heart of them. The four types of causal relationship and the three levels of empirical relationship in sociology are not contradictory to each other; rather they can be combined in one picture as shown in Figure 3.2. If participants' decision-making in lifelong learning is seen as a type of behaviour at the individual level, an adequate social theory of lifelong learning is required, at least, to illustrate two sets of relationship, which are also themselves inter-related.

Figure 3.2 The interdependencies between different level social factors
(adapted from Coleman, 1990; Abell, 1992)



First, all social phenomena can and should be explained as resulting from action and interaction of individuals. At the same time, individuals are socially constructed actors, located in various groups. Individual actions are influenced and restrained by a range of social frameworks, such as social class, gender, age-related historical issues, etc. This complexity shows the nature of the interdependency and conjectures between macro- and micro-level inferences. 'Adequate' explanatory power of a theory should enable it to explain how individual actions are 'structured' and combined into systemic level outcomes (Abell, 1992).

Previous research in western countries shows that individual learners have freedom to make their choices about participation in various learning activities. However, as learning takes place in a social setting, their preferences for alternative actions are constrained by different social relations and conditions. The research shows that participants in lifelong learning tend to come from a limited age range and socio-economic background. For example, according to Scottish Office statistics (Scottish Office Education Department, 1993, in Tett, 1996), adult learners were usually under 35 years old and from a skilled, managerial or professional background. In contrast, the

non-learners tended to be from older age groups, ethnic minorities, those who had been in long-term unemployment, and those from semi- and unskilled occupations. Lack of time and financial support have been recognized as the most frequently mentioned obstacles preventing people from engaging in structured learning activities (Tett, 1996). Gorard and Rees (2002) use a notion of 'learning trajectory' to denote and conceptualize the interaction between individual learning choices and constraining social parameters. Two elements are involved in this notion. One is that people's educational pathways are largely determined by the resources that they derive from their social background. The other element is that an individual's previous experience of learning may also constrain his or her capacity to take up the available learning opportunities. Furthermore, the learning opportunities available are also socially constituted, which in turn also influences learners' choice making. Whereas voluntary learning is perceived to be part of the cultural pattern of the middle class, people from working-class communities tend to be hindered from participating because there is a fear that learning will lead to their being differentiated from the majority of the community (Tett, 1996).

Second, it is also important to address the relationship between individual and sub-individual level. That is, how individual goals, preferences, beliefs and values are created and established; and how sources of belief, affect and value at sub-individual level and preferences and goals at individual level are coordinated. Attitudes and perceptions play a significant role in both participation and non-participation in learning, according to Tett (1996). For example, being confident in one's ability to learn can promote a person's participation, while decisions to participate in learning are intimately connected with a person's ability to control their life and anticipate the future. Whether a person has mentally accepted and internalized a wish or need to acquire knowledge and skills plays an important role in individuals' decision making.

In short, the nature of interdependency between different-level social factors is a starting point to developing the discussion on individuals' decision making and participation in lifelong learning. Two theoretical frameworks have been widely used to build insights into people's decision-making processes, namely, rational choice theory and learner identity. The following sections will review these two theoretical frameworks.

3.3 Rational choice on lifelong learning participation

Rational choice theory has been considered as a strong explanatory theory which attempts to resolve the micro-macro relationship in social and economic actions (Elster, 1994; Beckhoven, De Jong and Van Hout, 2002). This theory has a long tradition of attempts to explain, understand and predict individual action in economics and sociology, but has always been contested and controversial (Hedstrom and Stern, 2008). There are mainly two versions of rational choice theory, namely, a strong version and a weak version respectively. These two versions of rational choice theory are underpinned by different notions of rationality. An account of different rationalities is argued to be quite central to the discipline of rational choice theory (Sen, 2002); and is considered as playing a privileged but not exclusive role in a general account of human behaviour (Elster, 1986). Sen (2002) provides a broad interpretation as ‘the discipline of subjecting one’s choice – of action as well as of objectives, values and priorities – to reasoned scrutiny’ (p.4). In other words, rationality is construed and understood as reasoned choice. This section will start with a brief introduction of rationalities, and will lead the discussion to the two different versions of rational choice theory. This will be followed by a review of the application of rational choice theory to lifelong learning participation.

3.3.1 Rationality and social action

Different authors have generated different typologies of rationality. For example, Weber groups this concept into formal and substantive rationality; and another common taxonomy depicts three forms of rationality in relation to social agents’ practices, namely, instrumental, bounded/procedural and expressive rationality (Hargreaves Heap, 1989; Hargreaves Heap *et al.*, 1992). Although appearing under different terms, these typologies share some common features. A brief outline will be given to aid further discussion of rational choice theory.

-- Instrumental rationality

First, the instrumental sense of rationality is defined as the choice of action to best satisfy a person’s objectives and preferences (Hargreaves Heap, *et al.*, 1992). The objectives and goals, as desires, motivate individuals. This notion is also called formal

rationality. It generally includes engaging with profit-maximising calculation procedure that determines an action or decision making (Morrison, 1995). In turn, the decisions will be made based on a system of cost-effectiveness measurement, with a formal consideration of means and ends (Brubaker, 1984; Morrison, 1995; Hughes, *et al*, 2003).

Instrumental rationality can take place in two contexts, that is, certainty and uncertainty. Under the circumstance of certainty, individuals are able to evaluate all the calculable risks and the possible outcomes, so as to select the most preferred means to realize their pre-defined goals (Scott, 1995). However, the situation of certainty does not cover the full range of social acts and relations. When individual actors face conditions of uncertainty – that is where actions may involve unknown variables, unpredictable and multiple consequences – strategic choices need to be made. For example, individuals' decision-making may depend on their anticipation of other actors' actions. Strategic action under conditions of uncertainty is an important form of instrumental rationality. It also entails a systematic response to the pursuit of calculated self interest within particular problematic circumstances (Oakely, 1997), which is considered as the most and the only rational type of action in the strong and narrow version of rational choice theory (Goldthorpe, 1996, see later discussion).

-- *Bounded/procedural rationality*

Second, procedural rationality explains social action through the existence of rules on which individuals base their decisions (Hargreaves Heap, *et al*, 1992). According to Giddens (1984), rules are procedures that individuals may follow in their social life; they both enable and constrain people in their interaction. Rules, either implicit or explicit, can be in various forms, such as social norms, shared beliefs and values, as well as practical rules or regulations in specific situations. There are two major implications of procedural rationality in relation to individual action in a social world. First, in addition to the utility calculation of decision making, individual action is also implied, influenced, constrained, supported and constructed by social rules. Rather than performing calculations freely, individuals need to follow and incorporate social rules and values, and make use of available resources to make their decisions (Sen, 2002). Second, since rules form the building blocks of a society's culture (Hargreaves Heap, *et al*, 1992), individual action is embedded in a particular social and historical context. It is essential to understand this broader social context and other related elements, so as to

explain and analyze individual actions. It can not be reduced to merely economic calculation.

In brief, the shared rules of procedural rationality provide an irreducibly contextualized explanation and as such fill a gap left by instrumental rationality. However, it may be misinterpreted that procedural rationality frames mechanical activities and turns individuals into ‘cultural dopes’ (*ibid*). Rather than being a structuralist view, rule following opens up a possibility to further explain action which cannot be construed in terms of some prior defined objectives (*ibid*).

-- *Expressive rationality*

Expressive rationality explains individual action from a different perspective. This notion is closely linked to arguments about the reflexivity of individuals and their desire for self-respect (Hargreaves Heap, *et al*, 1992). Choice situations consist of a series of actions, rather than a means to a given end. In this sense of rationality, action involves making decisions on what ends to choose, how to realize them and, more importantly implicated, who we wish to be and what is worthy in ourselves. This notion is a process to ‘make sense of the self’, or ‘reflexivity’ (Hargreaves Heap, 1989). Expressive rationality denotes that individual actors can be aware of their preferences and goals in a self-conscious way. They may make the judgement whether to pursue or avoid the goals based on their resources and knowledge, particularly in terms of moral values, ethics, etc. This concept of reflexivity has been further developed and articulated with social action by other sociologists, such as Giddens (see also Archers, 2003). This will be discussed in relation to learner identity in a later section.

In short, rationality is a multiple concept, as an analytical starting point, to explain and analyze social action (Sen, 2002). Hargreaves Heap, *et al* (1992) argue that, rather than competing concepts, the various types of rationality should be regarded as complementary insights into human action in different settings. Drawing on references from the above discussion, rational choice theory will now be reviewed.

3.3.2 The basic concepts and assumptions of rational choice theory: a strong version

This basic model of rational choice theory, lying at the heart of modern economics,

assumes that rational individuals' actions are based on the principle of maximising utility (Bohman, 1992). According to Abell's broad interpretation, rational choice theory helps us to understand:

'...Individual actors (which in specified circumstances may be collectivities of one sort or another) as acting, or more likely interacting, in a manner such that they can be deemed to be doing the best they can for themselves, given their objectives, resources, and circumstances, as they see them.' (Abell, 2000, p.223)

This version of rational choice theory is based on several assumptions. First, adopting the standpoint of methodological individualism, rational choice theory argues that the elementary unit of social life is the individual human being (Elster, 1986; Zey, 1992; Scott, 1995)⁸. It also assumes that emergent social phenomena, i.e. social structures and systems, collective behaviour and decisions, are composed from and are the ultimate result of individual action and interaction (Scott, 1995). So, rational choice theory is considered as *'an analytical bridge between individual social actions and their structural macro outcomes'* (Turner, 1991, p.222).

Second, the optimality assumption states that rational actors make decisions based on their calculation of which alternatives will yield the greatest satisfaction of their goals and desires (Scott, 1995). Within the scope of the standard version of rational choice theory, the discussion of the exercise of rational choice is under the condition of 'certainty'. That is, in the situation of calculable risk, individual actors, driven by goals, interests and desires, are supposed to have a full knowledge of opportunities and preferences. With reference to a hierarchical preference order and a cost-benefit analysis, they make calculations regarding maximising utility of alternative choices (Turner, 1991). Rational behaviour is characterized by and tackles the relations between individual interests, goals and the action performed (Bohman, 1992).

Third, individual actors are assumed to be self-interested, purposive and goal-oriented (Turner, 1991; Scott, 1995; Abell, 2000). This view stems from the Hobbesian philosophical stance that human motivation is characterized as self-serving, selfish and

⁸ According to Zey (1998), rational choice theory is not ontological individualism, since it does not deny the existence of groups.

maximising, not affected by the interests of others nor concerned with the fairness of processes (Zey, 1998; Sen, 2002). Individuals are also aware of and clear about what they aim at.

These basic assumptions of rational choice theory reveal that this theory draws heavily on those approaches characterized by economics to seek to understand human behaviour in a variety of contexts (Becker, 1986). However, different sociologists have questioned and criticized this simple version of rational choice. The main criticism is of its limited explanatory power and its theoretical and empirical inadequacy to explain and understand the social interaction between individuals and structures.

The way in which the strong version of rational choice theory is incomplete is in its conception of rationality solely as utility maximization, which leads to its feature of economic reductionism. As outlined in the previous section, rationality is a multiple concept, including various forms. It is far from a unique or monopoly concept in the complexity of social action (Zafirovski, 1999). Its over-emphasis on economic maximization does not take contextual elements and boundary conditions into consideration, which constrains its power to explain value-bounded action. This strong version of rational choice theory neglects that values and habits may guide individual action. Its over-emphasis on individual choice and freedom also neglects that social actors make choices based on available resources and knowledge. Thus, this economic model analyzes individual action as an independent phenomenon, unrelated to other social elements (Zafirovski, 1999). Rather than restricting understanding of social action to this narrowly-defined instrumental rationality, a rational choice theory must be supplemented by other models of practical rationality and diversity of reasons (Elster, 1986; Zafirovski, 1999; Sen, 2002); and it needs to recognize the interplay between different level social factors.

3.3.3 A weak version of rational choice theory

In addition to the strong version of rational choice, Goldthorpe (1996) advocates a rather weaker notion of rationality. Bearing in mind the limitations of the strong version, Goldthorpe argues that *‘actors have goals, have usually alternative means of pursuing these goals and, in choosing their courses of action, tend in some degree to assess probably costs and benefits rather than, say, unthinkingly following social norms or*

giving unreflecting expression to cultural values' (1996, p.485). In Goldthorpe's weak version argument, individual agents are knowledgeable and goal oriented. They have the capacity of obtaining information and knowledge which would help them to find alternative means to achieve their goals. However, their information and knowledge may not be perfect, which hinders them from choosing the best way to pursue their goals by maximizing the utility. Rather, individuals use the source available to them, adapt to, or even compromise with, the opportunities and constraints characterizing their situations and accordingly make 'good enough' decisions to reach their goals (Goldthorpe, 1996, 1998). In other words, a weak version of rational choice theory can enable us to understand that individuals' goals and their courses of action to reach their goals are conditioned by the distribution of resources, opportunities and constraints. Meanwhile, this theory also accepts that departures from the standard of 'perfect rationality' are frequent. That is to say, individual actors are not always entirely clear about their goals, are not always aware of the optimal means of pursuing them, or in the end do not always follow the course of action that they know to be rational. In sum, Goldthorpe assumes that individual actors *'have both some possibility and some capacity for acting autonomously and for seeking their goals in ways that are more or less appropriate to the situations in which they find themselves'* (ibid, p.485).

3.3.4 Relating rational choice theory to participation in lifelong learning

As reviewed in the previous chapter, there are two theoretical perspectives in explaining people's participation in education and learning, namely, consensus theory (particularly human capital theory) and conflict theory (such as positional competition theory). These two theoretical underpinnings can be respectively fitted into the rational choice framework, as a preliminary analysis in this research.

On the one hand, human capital theory has been largely employed to explain that individuals participate and invest in education and training for the purpose of improving their skills and knowledge, and in turn promoting their productivity and increasing their future earnings. It can be explained by a strong version of rational choice. As a rational actor, an individual will calculate the learning cost against future profit from earnings. Along with the deep cultural assumptions of the value of education in the Chinese context, participation in lifelong learning can be explained as indispensable, clear prediction of gaining profit can be made. However, this dominant mode of theorizing

individuals' participation in learning tends to isolate individuals from the social and economic contexts in which learning takes place (Collins, 1979; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Hartley, 2003).

On the other hand, positional competition theory considers the role of education as a screening device and its value depends heavily on all sorts of social factors, such as the demand for and supply of skills and knowledge in the labour market. Even within a restricted view of the overall goal of participating in lifelong learning as being in terms of employment, different people with different resources and occupying different social positions may have different specific objectives, and accordingly adopt different strategies in pursuing these objectives. For example, people in a less advantaged social position, in terms of educational level, occupation, etc, are more likely to attend lifelong learning for the purpose of improving their standing in the competition and increasing their opportunity of upward mobility. For people already at the front of the employment race, attending lifelong learning can be a way of protecting themselves and maintaining their advantaged position. These courses of action involve individuals' identifying not only their preferences in line with their perceived values and beliefs about learning but also the learning opportunities available, which can be related to a key concept, 'learner identity', in understanding actors' choice-making over learning.

3.4 A key concept on understanding participation in learning: learner identity

Learner identity is considered by some authors (Wenger, 1998; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Billett, 2006) as an integral aspect of a social theory of lifelong learning. In a broad sense, 'identity' is a complex concept in sociology. It deals with issues of what people see and understand of themselves within particular social settings, often in terms of identifying continuous trajectories in various aspects of people's lives (Gallacher *et al*, 2002). In relation to learner identity, Gorard and Rees (2002) use the term 'learning trajectories' to account for an individual's learning experiences within the broader context of their lives. Learner identity itself refers to

'the ways in which adults come to understand the conditions under which they experience learning as 'facilitating' or 'inhibiting', 'constructive' or 'destructive'.

Learner identity suggests the emergence or affirmation of values and beliefs about 'learning', 'schooling' and 'knowledge'. The construct incorporates personal, social, sociological, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning, as integrated over time' (Weil, 1986, p.223, in Gorard and Rees, 2002).

That is to say, learner identity entails how individuals experience their learning, how they perceive the process of learning and how learning impacts on them (Wenger, 1998; Gerard and Rees, 2002; Lambe, 2006). Accordingly, it provides the framework through which alternative courses of educational action are evaluated, such as participation in lifelong learning (Gorard and Rees, 2002). Wenger (1998) argues that the concept of identity serves as pivot between the social and the individual. Rather than taking a simplistic individual-social dichotomy, the notion of 'identity' enables us to talk about the lived individual experience while recognizing and talking about the influences of socio-economic context and structures on individuals' learning management in this late modern society.

This notion of learner identity is related to Giddens' account of reflexivity (Giddens, 1991, 1992). In the late modern society, individuals, on the one hand, are to some extent increasingly given more freedom of choice and decision. They are expected to be more 'self-responsible' for the planning and organizing of their lives (Jansen and van der Veen, 1992). Giving meaning to life becomes more 'private' (*ibid*). On the other hand, individuals also confront conditions that they can hardly predict or confront conditions, which are beyond their ability to influence, which result in a challenge for them to make the 'right' decisions in terms of their learning and career opportunities. According to Giddens, individuals in the late modern society engage in a reflexive project, -- an endeavour in which we are continuously interrogating past, present and future. That is to say, individuals are engaged in an attempt to continual understanding and maintaining, monitoring and revising their actions and their consequences (Layder, 1994; Scott, 1995). This understanding and monitoring involves not only reflecting upon what has happened but also estimating what might happen in the future. Confronting uncertainties and risk, individuals find decision-making in life planning becomes more complex and may inadvertently lead to an unintended consequence (Giddens, 1991). People may have trust in certain conditions and consequences of action, but their knowledge may not be adequate or accurate in this rapidly changing

world. Those unintended consequences may be considered as conditions for future actions. During this process an individual's identity is also transformed. In short, Giddens (1991) argues that the identity is the product of our conscious action and the outcomes of on-going reflexive processes where individuals construct and reconstruct their self-perception in the light of impulses from their social surroundings.

Different researchers have conceptualized the development of learner identity in several ways. De Weerd *et al.* (2002) describe their model of a learning trajectory and argue that the learning trajectory is a continuous process, consisting of three moments: orientation, elaboration and integration. The orientation moment is when learners take up their responsibility for their learning and are aware of the learning needs and reasons; the elaboration moment involves the learners' choice, decision-making and engagement in all kinds of learning activities; and the integration moment takes place when the learners apply their learning in different contexts in addition to the learning community.

In relation to lifelong learning, Gorard and Rees (2002) identify three features of learner identity construction. Firstly, people make choices about their participation in education and training after school under influences such as those from family, community and their previous learning experience. However, these are not framed exclusively in terms of the economic benefits which will be generated from such learning activity. Rather, the choice making reflects deep-rooted attitudes towards and experience of education and training in other settings, such as formal education institutions and community-based activities. In other words, individuals' learner identities are predominantly formed in early life (Gorard *et al.*, 1998). Also, Gorard and Rees (2002) emphasize the ways in which individuals' learning experiences are pervaded by history and place. For example, the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment associated with adult vocational education thirty years ago in China served to construct the learner in quite different ways from those made available within adult higher education of the same period or the skill training programmes and on-the-job training of the contemporary society. So, the learner identities engendered in students can vary between different types of institution and historical period. Accordingly, Gorard and Rees (2002) thirdly point out the issue of continuity and changes in learner identities over time. For example, the value of learning has been emphasized in China for generations as 'a residue of the past'. And, whereas the country through the 'work unit' (*danwei*) was largely responsible for

people's education and training thirty years ago, learning has become a personal activity for the individual as never before (Evans, 2002). Individual actors become increasingly responsible for making significant choices on their investment in education and training.

Thus, the construction of learner identity is something we constantly negotiate and renegotiate between the self and the socio-economic settings during the course of our lives (Wenger, 1998). It is embedded in the complexity of individuals' social experience. Under this circumstance, participation in lifelong learning requires a reworking of personal biography, which helps to construe and understand the building and development of self-identity as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Cieslik, 2006; Stokes and Wyn, 2007).

3.5 Relating rational choice theory and learner identity

This chapter argues that the pre-condition of understanding and creating a learning society is to build an adequate social theory of lifelong learning. This chapter also reviews two preliminary frameworks for this research, namely, rational choice theory and the notion of learner identity. From the researcher's point of view, rather than contradicting each other, these two frameworks can be combined and integrated in this research: while rational choice theory examines different specific decisions in individual's lives, the learner identity notion can assist to build a coherent account of these different life episodes so as to explore the complexity of negotiation between the self and social structures.

In their work on young people's 'careership', Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) propose a model of decision making, which to some extent integrates rational choice theory and the learner identity concept. This model attempts to inter-relate three dimensions. First, Hodkinson and Sparkes argue that young people make their career decision in a pragmatically rational rather than structurally determined way. Their personal choice can not be separated from their family background, culture and life histories. Second, individual preferences are made within a context of perceived and real opportunity structures which will mediate the choices made. Third, individuals' career development and decision-making can also take place in the partly unpredictable patterns of turning-points and routine, which in turn make up individuals' life courses. Hodkinson and

Sparkes (1997) argue that this model avoids the twin pitfalls of social determinism and assuming individuals to act as completely free agents. Similarly, Hatcher (1998) points out that, although rational choice is a significant element in many transition decisions, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient one to understand individuals' actions. It is because strategic calculation and plans can also be accompanied with inadequate information or reasoning which leads to 'irrational action', and with non-utilitarian goals and values which is the basis for 'non-rational action'. He also argues that rational choice may not be able to provide a multiplicity of historically-constructed accounts of students' identities.

This research intends to examine the individual participation in lifelong learning and explore the capacity or power of social theory to understand people's learning management in the current Chinese context. If participation in learning is seen as an individual action lying at the very centre of different levels of social factors, to understand it involves analyzing and construing the interdependencies and interplays between social structural forces and individuals' preferences, attitudes and beliefs. Rational choice theory allows me to analyze the learners' decision making in attending the STTP programme; and different forms of rationalities assists me to identify the relevant factors which have influence on their learning participation. The learner identity notion at the same time enables me to connect individuals' different social experiences (such as their learning in the formal settings, their participation in lifelong learning, their family background, their work and employment experience, etc) and develop a coherent picture of their life course, in order to understand the continuity or change in their perceptions over the time. To sum up, this study intends to use these two preliminary theoretical frameworks to integrate different-level factors, social and individuals, and to illustrate the dynamic relationship between agency and structure.

Chapter 4 Methodology Issues and Research Design

4.1 Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, the aims of this research are to explore individuals' motivations and decision making in participating in the education and training programme STTP, related to labour market competition in Shanghai, especially in the high skill sector; to investigate individuals' perceptions of the value of lifelong learning in a newly marketized and competitive context; and to examine the extent to which certain different theoretical perspectives provide appropriate frameworks for the understanding and analysis of participation in STTP. In this regards, this research necessarily involves illustrating, explaining, understanding and analyzing the interrelationships among people's motivations and perceptions of lifelong learning, the labour market competition, and the changing socio-economic context.

This chapter provides a discussion on the methodological considerations that have been integrated in this research process, from the beginning of setting up the research questions to collecting and analyzing the data. It firstly starts with perspectives on epistemological, ontological and methodological issues, which led to my choice of mixed methods – quantitative method facilitating qualitative method. Secondly, the use of a case study approach is discussed. This is followed by the illustration of how secondary data analysis, questionnaire and interviews were designed and delivered to collect data. The last section reviews the data analysis procedures and other issues, such as validity and reliability of the whole research process.

4.2 A discussion of research paradigm

A research paradigm is defined as 'a set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimate or first principles' and is based on assumptions and answers to three fundamental questions, namely, those of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.107). Considerations of these issues are of vital importance in determining the criteria according to which one selects and defines problems for inquiry and how one approaches them theoretically and methodologically (Husen, 1997; Bryman, 2001).

Ontology concerns the nature and knowledge of reality; epistemology refers to what should be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline; and methodology asks questions about how an inquirer goes about finding out this knowledge (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.107; Delanty and Strydom, 2003). Different positions in relation to issues in these three fields lead to different research paradigms. Also, different researchers distinguish these paradigms in different ways. For example, Sarantakos (1998) categorizes research paradigms into positivism, interpretivism and critical theory; whereas Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2005) suggest positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. To meet the aims of this study, the thinking, planning and conducting of this research is influenced by the post-positivist paradigm. I will illustrate and argue the reason for adopting this paradigm in this research in this section.

4.2.1 The dualism or duality of educational research: quantitative or qualitative, or both?

Social research is often dichotomized between quantitative and qualitative methodology. These two methodologies of research hold contrasting philosophical positions and stand for contrasting research paradigms.

Quantitative research takes a stance within the positivist paradigm. Positivism refers to a scientific research tradition. It suggests an ontological position of realism; that is, it asserts the facticity of the world and an external or 'real' reality out there (Scott and Usher, 1999). It considers human beings to be rational individuals; their behaviour is governed and structured by the same social laws and external causes, which produce consistent outcomes for all individuals (Sarantakos, 1998). Positivism defines its epistemological assumptions as objectivism. It argues that knowledge and fact exist in the form of time- and context-free generalizations and exist independently of those who seek to know them (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Scott and Usher, 1999). From the positivist perspective, social research aims at predicting and controlling the objective world. The measurement of knowledge and truth relies on deductive hypothesizing and numerical data (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; May, 2001). Quantitative research tends to employ a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research; that is researchers might start with a general picture of social life and then investigate a particular aspect of it to test the strength of existing theories (May, 2001). Here theories come before the research, and are tested or refuted by empirical evidence. Employing

the epistemological and ontological characteristics of positivism, quantitative research also conceptualizes reality in terms of variables and the relationship between them, investigated through systematic measurement and precise conceptual frameworks (Punch, 1998; Coxon, 1999).

The criticisms and challenges to quantitative research approach essentially come from the anti-positivists' attack on science's mechanistic and reductionist view of nature (Cohen, *et al*, 2000). This attack argues that scientific methods mislead by presenting a restricted picture of human beings and their behaviour as passive, determined and controlled. Thus, they ignore the notions of choice, freedom, individuality and moral responsibility (*ibid*).

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism, along with other schools of thought such as critical theory, can be considered as a form of anti-positivism. From an ontological perspective, interpretivism affirms a relativist belief that realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based. The construction of realities depends on the interaction between active subjects and the world (Giddens, 1976, in Cohen, *et al*, 2000). It opposes the view that human behaviour is governed by general, universal laws and characterized by underlying regularities (Cohen, *et al*, 2000). Instead, it agrees that the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the autonomous individuals who are a central part of the ongoing action being investigated. Interpretivism adopts an epistemological position of subjectivity. It considers knowledge as a human construction. Social science in this sense has for the purpose of understanding and explaining social life and social events through the direct experience and interpretation of people in specific contexts (Sarantakos, 1998; Cohen, *et al*, 2000). Thus, instead of observable social actions, it is the subjective meanings and values attached to such actions that are the important focus of social research.

Qualitative research has a tendency to stress an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research; that is, research comes before theory and aims at generating theoretical propositions on social life from data (May, 2001). Along with the research purposes of understanding and explaining social phenomena, meaning-centred approaches are used, with discursive data collection and analysis.

The challenges to the qualitative research approach commonly focus on four issues. First, in the absence of some set of criteria, how can the researcher ensure an adequate warrant for a subjectively mediated account of inter-subjective meaning? Quantitative researchers also tend to question the interpretivist approach as lacking in objectivity and scientific controls (Walker and Evers, 1997). The second issue has been defined as ‘the lack of a critical purchase’. The interpretivist approach is identified as being descriptive and privileging the views of actors. Critics claim that interpretive accounts lack critical interest or the ability to critique the very accounts the actors produce. Third, a problem is identified in ‘the problem of authority’, which questions the (overly sovereign) authoritative stance of the researcher in interpreting social actions. The fourth problem is directed at the constructivists’ psychological claim that knowledge construction resides solely in the minds of individuals (Schwandt, 1994, p130).

From the above review, we can distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies in terms of different epistemologies, ontologies and methods employed (see table 4.2.1). On the one hand, quantitative research is characterized by being functional-structural, objective-rational, goal-directed and looking for reality (unconstructed by anyone), truth and knowledge (Husen, 1997; Pring, 2000). On the other hand, qualitative research is considered humanistic, subjective and looking for multiple realities (constructed by each individual), consensus, meanings, opinions and perceptions (Punch, 1998; Pring, 2000; Wellington, 2000; Bryman, 2001).

These differences between these two research methodologies lead to debates or theses on paradigms. On the one hand, the oppositional diversity thesis asserts that these methodologies and paradigms are incommensurable because of their sharply contrasting epistemological and ontological standpoints. On the other hand, the complementary diversity thesis affirms that the tendency to dichotomize the quantitative and qualitative research methodologies is understandable because of their different philosophical stands, but, it is misleading to some extent. It argues that different methodologies and paradigms can be complementary rather than competitive to each other (Husen, 1997; Walker and Evers, 1997; Pring, 2000). Different methodologies and approaches can be equally valid and useful to employ, depending upon the purpose of a particular research project and the kind of knowledge the research is searching for (Husen, 1997; Neuman,

2000; Silverman, 2000). Rather than taking a specific stance in advance, it may be more important to judge and choose the ‘best’ approaches to address the research questions. This argument displays the essence of post-positivism.

Table 4.2.1 Differences between quantitative and qualitative methodology

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Quantitative methodology</i>	<i>Qualitative methodology</i>
Perception of reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objective • Simple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective • Socially constructed
How humans are perceived	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rational individuals • Obeying external rules and laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creators of their world • Making sense of the world • Creating systems of meanings
The nature of science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deductive • Natural science model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inductive • Interpreting social phenomenon
The role of value/context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value neutral and value-free • Independent of context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value-bound inquiry • context- and time-specific
The purpose of research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To predict course of events • To explain social life • To discover the laws of social life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explain, interpret and elucidate social life • To understand social life • To discover people’s meanings
Focus of research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variables • Cause-effect linkages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive processes,
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative, mathematical • Extensive use of statistical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative, meaning-centred • Discursive data analysis

(Adapted from Sarantakos, 1998; Neuman, 2000)

Post-positivism⁹ holds an ontological stance of critical realism. Critical realism argues that the world is composed not only of events, experiences, discourses and impressions, but also of underlying structures, powers and tendencies that do exist. According to critical realism, underlying reality provides the conditions of possibility for actual events and perceived phenomena (Patomaki and Wight, 2000). That is, it assumes reality exists independently and intractably, but can only be imperfectly apprehendable

⁹ Different social scientists have different definitions of post-positivism. One of the strands sees post-positivism as all the later paradigms which come after a critique of positivism. In this research, the definition of post-positivism by Guba and Lincoln (1994) is used.

(Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Social groups or individuals have different (organized) experiences of the world, which can be seen as the outcomes of social construction. Also, new experiences and ideas will reshape and reconstruct how we have come to understand things (Pring, 2000). In this sense, research often focuses on people's perceptions of reality where different perceptions are equally valid. This shows the need for an interpretive qualitative research tradition to understand the world from the perspective of participants and to understand the evolving of a set of ideas. Meanwhile, the post-positivist approach believes that, despite our understanding of reality shaping reality itself, it is the stable, independent and enduring features of reality that enable generalizations to be made. In other words, a single approach may not succeed in encompassing human beings in their full complexity (Schulze, 2003). In this sense, pluralism in methodologies and approaches is advocated; and strategies of combining/mixing quantitative and qualitative approaches are used for the purpose of triangulation across multiple sources to get a better understanding of reality. It is argued that only by applying both quantitative and qualitative approaches can the breadth, depth and richness of human life be grasped and captured (Sayer, 1992; Creswell, 2003; Schulze, 2003).

4.2.2 My philosophical position in this research

A post-positivist position has been adopted in this research. The theoretical entry points and models that have been outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 provide the basis for this research into individuals' participation in the lifelong learning programme STTP. This research undertakes two main tasks. First, since little research has been done in the field of lifelong learning in Shanghai, particularly in relation to labour market competition, it is useful and helpful to start the research by generating a general picture of what lifelong learning means to individuals and what is perceived as the labour market competition in Shanghai. This general picture will identify and describe key features of the context, participants and their perceptions of issues and themes pertinent to this study. The aim is general and descriptive rather than particular and interpretive.

Second, the main aim of this research is to understand how individuals' opinions on different issues and themes are formed. For example, what are the factors influencing people's perceptions of lifelong learning and the labour market competition? How did these factors influence people's opinions? It involves analysis of the interactive

relationship between individuals' perceptions (agency) and the changing marketized context (structure). This task helps in the examining, developing and exploring of appropriate theoretical frameworks to understand individuals' participation in the localized lifelong learning programme STTP in Shanghai. It shows the need to adopt an interpretivist, constructivist and qualitative approach in this research. Therefore, these two main research purposes and tasks indicate it is necessary to draw on a variety of sources of data through different analytical approaches, techniques and tools; that is, a mixed methods approach.

4.2.3 The role of theory/ies in this research

Social science research can be divided into two types in terms of the role of theory, that is, theory-development and theory-verification/testing research (Punch, 1998; Yin, 2003; Pinker, 2004). A theory-verification piece of research, which is defined as a deductivist approach, starts with theory: theory helps to develop hypotheses, and the research is designed to test these hypotheses. A theory-development piece of research aims at generating a theory from the collected data, which is defined as an inductivist approach. Punch (1998) argues that both types of research are needed; either purpose or sometimes both purposes can be appropriate in one research project; and the selection of the specific position(s) depends on the research topic, on the context and practical circumstances of the research, and especially on how much prior theorising and knowledge exist in this area. It can be argued that both purposes are appropriate from two different perspectives. On the one hand, a primary aim of this research is to test the western sociological theories in an eastern context. All the theories and theoretical frameworks I draw on to develop this research come from western sociology, such as rational choice theory, human capital theory, etc. Through reading and reviewing the relevant western sociological theories, important constructs, factors and variables related to this research topic are identified and specified. I identify several potentially important constructs (e.g. positional conflict) from the literature on decision making on schooling and labour market competition, as well as several constructs and factors with evident Chinese characteristics (e.g. the impact of *hukou* system in the labour market). Specification of constructs helps to shape the initial design of theory-building research and could be valuable for research and could be valuable for researchers to measure these factors more accurately (Eisenhardt, 2002). These identified factors were measured in the questionnaire fieldwork, which will be discussed in detail in section

4.5.2. The initial findings from the questionnaire led to further refining of the research focus in the subsequent research steps, to explore, explain and understand the interaction and relationship between different constructs. However, although the early identification of those possible constructs was helpful, it was necessary to recognize their tentative nature. It meant no construct was ‘guaranteed a place in the resultant theory’, no matter how well it was measured (Eisenhardt, 2002). It is especially important to be aware of this point in this research, since there could be a potential problem of pre-defined or over/under-emphasized (western-characterized) constructs.

4.2.4 Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches

Different strategies have been proposed to combine and integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches. Bryman (1988 and 2001) and Hammersley (1996) have proposed similar classifications in terms of the purposes of combining these two methods, such as for triangulation, for facilitation and for complementarity. Triangulation refers to ‘the use of quantitative research to corroborate qualitative research findings or vice versa’; a facilitation approach involves employing one strategy in order to aid research using the other strategy; and complementarity occurs when these two research strategies are applied to different aspects of an investigation (Bryman, 2001, p447). Creswell (2003, p.16) on the other hand describes three strategies in terms of the procedures and processes used to combine different approaches. Sequential procedures elaborate on or expand the findings of one method with another method; concurrent procedures converge quantitative and qualitative data so as to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem; and transformative procedures use a theoretical lens as an overarching perspective within a design containing both quantitative and qualitative data.

In this research, the collection and analysis of quantitative data was followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, which constitutes a ‘sequential explanatory strategy’ (Creswell, 2003), and is employed for the purpose of facilitation and complementarity. The initial quantitative approach facilitated the qualitative approach, by providing me with an overall descriptive picture of why people attended the programme STTP, what they considered as the most important elements of STTP, what elements and factors they thought necessary for success in the labour market competition and so forth. Correlative analysis between certain demographic and

background characteristics of the participants and factors, such as motivation, perceptions of the labour market and particular features of STTP, adds a level of finer detail to this descriptive picture. So, on the basis of the initial quantitative answers to these ‘what’ questions, the qualitative approach is designed to focus specifically on ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions in relation to individuals’ perspectives and choices.

Second, the qualitative approach here played a complementary role in relation to the quantitative approach. The qualitative approach explores, expands and deepens understanding and analysis of the initial quantitative findings. Creswell (*ibid*) points out that this procedure can be especially useful when unexpected or surprising results arise from an initial quantitative study, with the qualitative study being used to examine these results in greater detail and depth. My own study anticipated the use of qualitative methods to explore key issues ‘mapped’ by the quantitative data in more detail, not just the ‘unexpected and surprising results’, although clearly it will do this too.

4.3 Research strategy: case study

Yin (2003) lists several social science research strategies, that is, experiments, surveys, histories, the analysis of archival information and case study. Each research strategy can be, although not necessarily, located within one particular paradigm, represents different research style and indicates different ways of collecting and analysing empirical data. Rather than arranging these research strategies ‘hierarchically’, Yin (2003) argues that the choice of research strategy depends on three conditions, namely, 1) the type of research questions, 2) the extent of the researcher’s control over actual behaviour events, and 3) the degree of focus on contemporary events.

This research employs the case study strategy for a number of reasons. First, as the research purpose stated in Chapter 1 is to illustrate, explain and understand the interaction and relationship among people’s motivations and decision-making in lifelong learning, the labour market competition and the changing socio-economic context, the research questions not only cover ‘what’ questions but also ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions. These explanatory questions are likely to lead to the use of case study (Yin, 1993, 2003). Also, as a matter of research scale, the focus on a particular learning programme seems to be practical and manageable. Second, this research is dealing with

a contemporary phenomenon, that is, individual's participation in the lifelong learning programme STTP, especially in relation to the emergent labour market competition and the changing socio-economic setting in Shanghai. Third, as individuals are asked about their perceptions of what they have experienced and what and how they think about the labour market competition, there is little that I, as a researcher, can manipulate over their behaviour. In this case, this research fits the three conditions proposed by Yin.

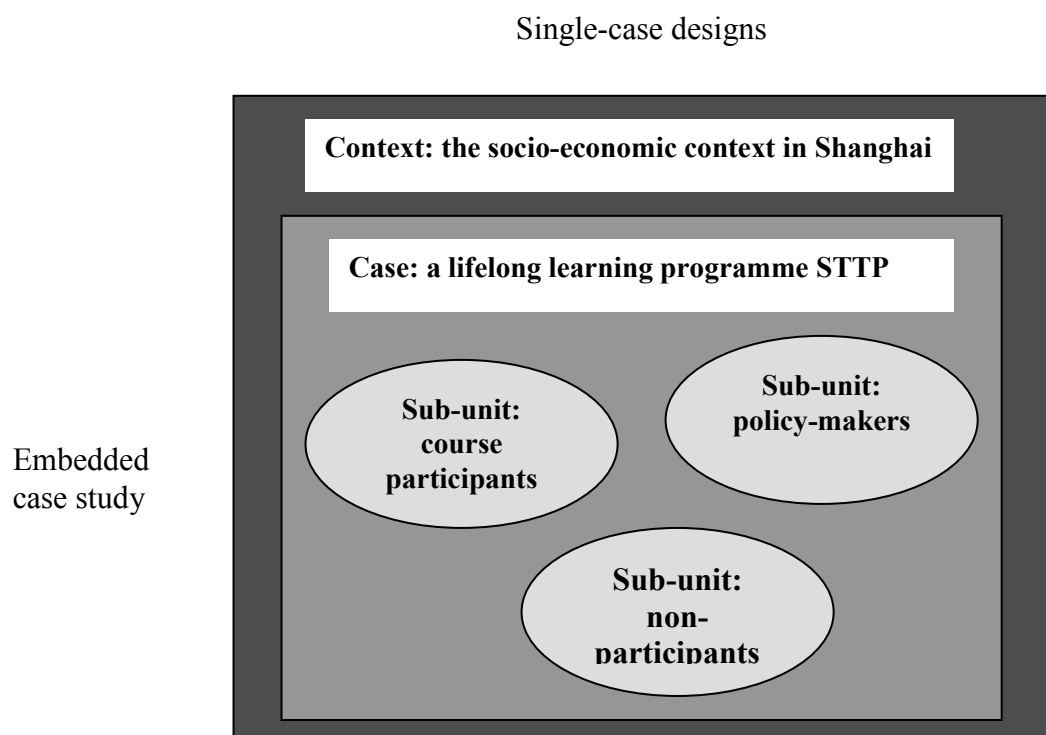
Another reason for using case study in this research lies in the inclusion of contextual conditions which are believed highly pertinent to the studied phenomenon or object in this research (Yin, 1993, 2003; Creswell, 1998). The main object in this research is STTP, the lifelong learning programme. The development of STTP, as discussed in the previous chapters, is inseparable from the social and economic development in Shanghai at a macro-level. Also, individual participation in lifelong learning, considered as a kind of individual behaviour, is both influenced by personal attitudes and beliefs and embedded in social relations that are shaped by social and economic norms, interpersonal relationships, etc. To understand individuals' perception of and participation in STTP involves analysing the interactions between the individual experience and the structural social factors, such as the socio-economic changes and the educational reform in Shanghai. The complex and contextualized nature of the research object STTP makes the case strategy valuable and suitable (Scholz and Tietje, 2002).

The literature offers different dimensions and classifications on types of case study, such as in terms of design, motivation, epistemological status, purposes, format and so on (Scholz and Tietje, 2002). In terms of the research design, there are two ways of classifying case studies. One distinction is made between holistic and embedded case studies. Holistic case study only deals with one unitary case; while an embedded case study involve more than one unit, or rather subunits for analysis (Yin, 2003). The other classification is based on the numbers of cases to be studied, single or multiple. Based on these two classifications, Yin (2003) identifies four basic types of case study designs, namely, single-case (holistic), single-case (embedded), multiple-case (holistic) and multiple-case (embedded) designs.

This research employs the single-case (embedded) design. To be more specific, the STTP programme can be considered as the primary case or unit, and individual

participants, non-participants and policy-makers can be seen as sub-units. First, STTP is chosen as a single case due to the particular aspects of its nature. The rather unusual nature of a localized education and training programme stands out. A single case study allows me to gain deep insights and generate thick description of STTP (Cohen *et al*, 2000; Denscombe, 2003). Second, Yin (2003) points out that the same case study may involve more than one unit of analysis. The sub-units in this research consist of course participants, non-participants and policy-makers. Since a single-case holistic design may be conducted at an abstract level and lack any clear measures, to incorporate subunits can add significant opportunities for intensive analysis of individual perceptions on and their participation (or non-participation) in STTP. Last but not least, after the data are collected and analyzed at the sub-unit level, the analysis needs to return to the original phenomenon of interest, that is, STTP in this research. Through this comprehensive analysis of this localized lifelong learning programme, the whole case study strives to catch close-up reality and to present thick description of how individuals perceive STTP in a newly marketized context and how these people experience the newly-emerging labour market competition. At the same time, this study illustrates the interplay between macro-level social factors (structure) and micro-level individual motivations to attend lifelong learning (agency).

Figure 4.3 The case study design in this research, adapted from Yin (2003)

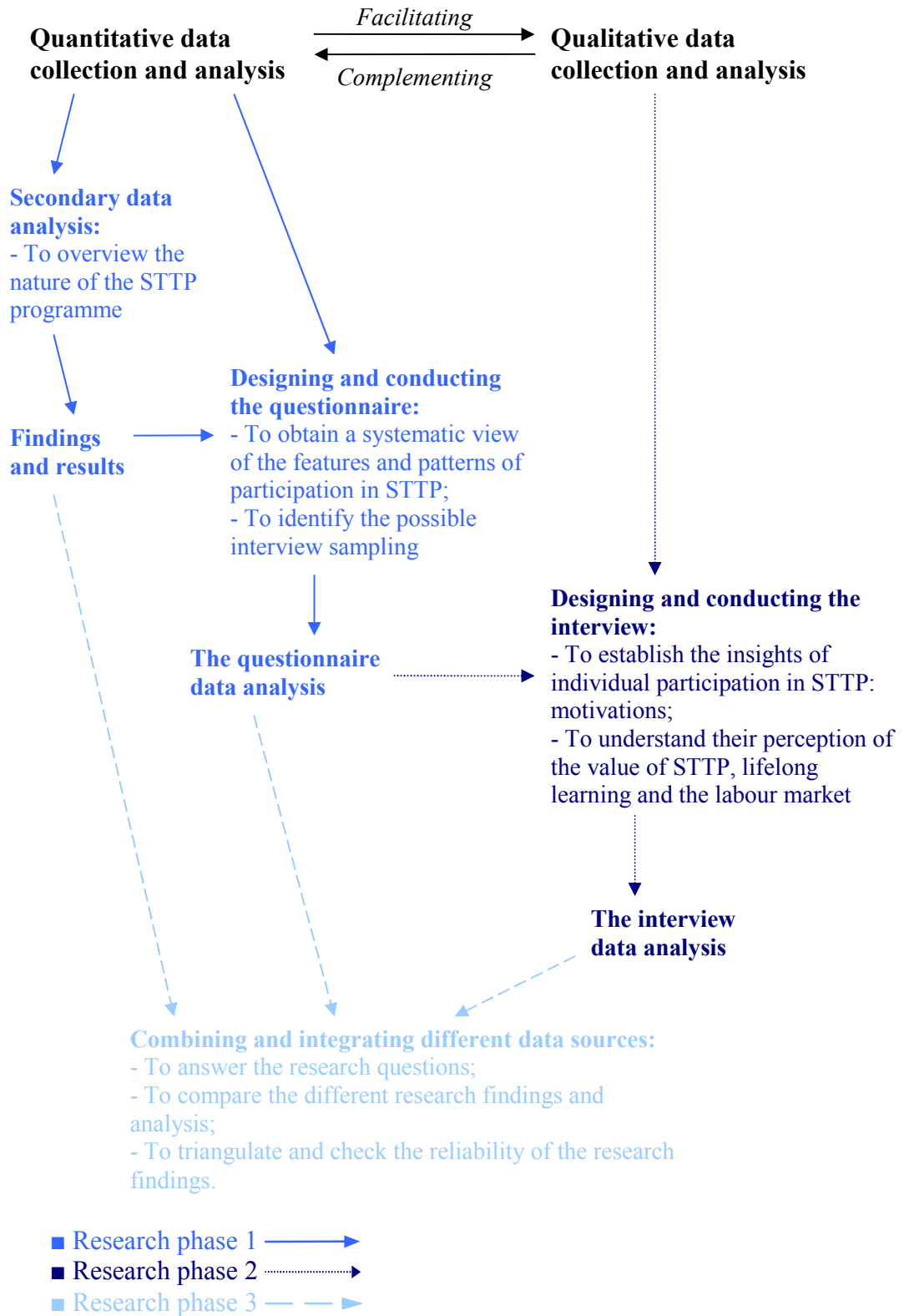


In sum, the STTP programme, as a unique case in Shanghai, is employed as the main unit; and the sub-units are individual course participants, non-participants and policy-makers. At each level of analysis, different data collection techniques are used, such as secondary data analysis, questionnaire and interviews. Figure 4.3 shows the case study design in this research, which is adapted from Yin (2003).

4.4 The phases in this research

In brief, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this research uses a case study of the lifelong learning programme STTP to study and explore the perceived notion of lifelong learning and labour market competition. Specifically, quantitative method precedes and facilitates qualitative method, and qualitative method complements the quantitative method. There are three phases, creating two data-sets (see Figure 4.4): quantitative data collection and analysis, qualitative data collection and analysis, and integrating and combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis so as to reach conclusions. In the following section, the issues of research methods for the study will be addressed in detail.

Figure 4.4 Schematic diagram of the research phases, aims and methods



4.5 Phase one: quantitative data collection and analysis

As stated in the design of this research, a quantitative approach was first employed to achieve three broad aims:

- 1) To overview the nature of the STTP programme and the relevant information on the Shanghai labour market;
- 2) To obtain a systematic picture of the general features and patterns of participation in STTP; and
- 3) To identify possible themes, foci and potential interviewee samples for further qualitative investigation.

These three aims to some extent indicated the requirement of some ‘objective’ account or information to start the research before going to the in-depth investigation on how people perceive lifelong learning and the labour market competition. On the one hand, the official website of STTP provided some data and resources, such as the content of the courses, the enrolment rates of certain courses, and the history of the development of STTP. However, these information resources were not adequate or appropriate for the purpose of this study. For example, while the website showed some information on why the government set up this project, it did not tell us why individuals tended to attend these courses. That is to say, the official website offered information from the perspective of government and policy-makers, while this study is primarily concerned with individuals’ perceptions. For this latter purpose, it was decided that a semi-structured questionnaire could be useful to help depicting a general picture of STTP and the individual participation situation in STTP. Thus, secondary data analysis and a questionnaire were both employed in the first research phase.

4.5.1 Secondary data analysis

Secondary data analysis is defined as any further analysis of an existing data set which presents interpretations or conclusions additional to, or different from, those presented in the first report on the inquiry as a whole and its main results (Hakim, 1982, in May, 1993). Secondary data analysis will generate numerous advantages, such as saving cost and time for further data analysis and new interpretations and offering opportunity for longitudinal analysis, subgroup analysis and cross-cultural analysis (Bryman, 2001).

Corti *et al* (1995) argue that secondary analysis may entail the analysis of either quantitative or qualitative data.

-- The employment of the secondary data analysis method

In this research stage, secondary data analysis involved a review of governmental documents, policies and official statistics related to the STTP programme, the Shanghai labour market and economic development in recent years. After a literature review on relevant theoretical frameworks underpinning this whole study, such as lifelong learning discourses, a series of themes and foci were identified, such as the governmental orientation in setting up STTP, the current programme development and individual participation in STTP. Ideally, much of this information could be best obtained through interviews with relevant policy-maker and administrators. However, it was difficult to do so, due to my limited social network with policy-makers in Shanghai and especially in STTP¹⁰. So, reviews of the relevant government policies, documents and official statistics were adopted as an alternative way of obtaining the information. Secondary data could enhance this case study research by enhancing the situation of contemporary accounts of STTP within an historical context (May, 2001). However, we needed to bear in mind that the information on these government websites was provided from a different perspective or for a different purpose from those of the research. Rather than viewing documents as a form of reality, I took this secondary data and information as providing another perspective (that is, the government's) on the STTP programme, and as an opportunity to gain (possibly) contrasting views held by different groups of stakeholders in STTP, i.e. the government, individuals and employers. Also, the secondary data provided materials which facilitated the planning and design of the subsequent research steps (*ibid*). In addition, May (2001) points out that success in the collection of secondary data and documents to some extent depends on some practical problems as well, such as issues associated with time, cost and the availability and accessibility of documentary evidence.

In brief, the aims of the secondary data analysis are

¹⁰ Once again, I tried to approach the relevant officers and staff in the STTP programme in Oct 2004 during the questionnaire fieldwork in Shanghai. It turned out to be a failure because of my lack of social networks related to this research. Instead, the STTP official website was recommended by the STTP staff to gain the information I would like; as they said (and meanwhile turned down my interviews) 'we put most of the information on the website'.

- To enhance this case study research through the ability of secondary data to situate the contemporary accounts within an historical context;
- To allow comparison to be made between the data recorded in the documents and those which would be generated in the further research investigation; and
- To obtain data resources upon which to base further research design.

-- Analysis of the secondary data

The quality of the secondary data plays an essential role in this kind of study (Bryman, 2001). Four criteria have been proposed for approaching and assessing the quality of the data or information available from documentary sources, i.e. authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Scott, 1990). Authenticity means whether the document is genuine; credibility checks the degree to which the data and information is free from error, undistorted and sincere; representativeness assesses the extent to which the data addresses the issues of concern in my research; and finally, meaning refers to the clarity and comprehensibility of secondary data (*ibid*).

The secondary data in this study, such as the government documents, policies and official statistics, were mainly collected from government websites and the official STTP websites. Partly for reasons of limited personal social networks mentioned earlier I had to accept what data there were, rather than being able to ask for the data I wanted. To ensure an efficient and focussed search of the available data, I started with clear research aims and questions, and looked for those data what would support the answering of these questions.

Having considered the above issues, the analysis of the information focused on the meaning of the data. A content analysis approach was employed here to analyze and understand the secondary data meaning. Scott (1990) divides data meaning into three levels of interpretation, that is, the meaning intended by the producers of a document, the received meaning by the audience and the internal or hidden meaning. While analysing the information and data from the governmental websites and the STTP official website, I managed to bear in mind several issues and questions. First, I tried to track the periods of time when the documents were published. Having considering this, I was able to identify other related socioeconomic events happening at similar times, so as to put documents in their socio-historic contexts (May, 2001). Second, I tried to

understand what the document aimed to tell readers; who were the targeted readers of the documents; and who might be the other stakeholders in these documents and policies. Third, and finally, both quantitative and qualitative content analyzes were used. Some basic data about aspects of STTP were utilized as background information, such as the development and achievement of the STTP, the number of the courses and their participants, etc. It is noteworthy that these data were used at face value if only because I had no alternative source to check these data. Reading these documents, I tried to identify particular emphases, such as economic versus self-development drivers of STTP. These emphases, in terms of words, phrases and sentences were counted and located in their particular contexts. The contextualization of the meanings of the phrases and senses and their contextualized information enabled me to understand and summarize the overall meaning of the documents and their relationship to my research.

-- Possible weaknesses in using the secondary data analysis

There were two weaknesses in utilising secondary data analysis in this research. First, the re-interpretation of these governmental documents and official statistics could be biased and subjective in terms of the researcher's own interests (May, 2001). To improve this, I reminded myself throughout of the need to be critical of these data in relation to, for example, their source and purposes. The other weakness came from the availability and accessibility of the secondary data. Those data shown in the policy documents did provide useful information, such as the number of participants in the programme, the history and the development of STTP, etc; yet, there was a lack of certain aspects, which were important in my research, for instance demographic data on participants in terms of their age, educational background, working experience, and so on. This limitation implied the necessity to collect the required primary data myself before going on with the qualitative study.

4.5.2 The questionnaire fieldwork

Based on the findings from the secondary data analysis and the review of the literature, a semi-structured questionnaire was designed to collect demographic and attitudinal data on aspects of individual learners' participation in lifelong learning and in STTP in particular, and their perceptions of the labour market competition. The questionnaire was delivered to 500 course participants in the autumn 2004 when the new cohort of

students started their STTP courses. Altogether, 279 useable questionnaires were returned¹¹.

A questionnaire approach is widely used for collecting survey information. It can provide structured and numerical data, which is comparatively straightforward to analyze (Cohen, *et al*, 2000). It is also considered to be a rapid, relatively easy and inexpensive way of collecting and discovering data on the characteristics and beliefs of the population at large (May, 1993). Several writers identify further characteristics of the questionnaire as:

- constructing questions to reflect theoretical propositions;
- analysing by employing statistical techniques imported directly from natural science;
- generalising from a sample to the population as a whole;
- explaining human behaviour by causality;
- discovering ‘objective’ indices of population characteristics and beliefs through a detailed attention to accurate measurement facilitated by standardization;
- offering less opportunity for bias or errors; and
- focusing on the replies of individual respondents.

(May, 1993; Cohen, *et al*, 2000; Bryman, 1988, 2001)

The questionnaire, as the second step in phase one, was designed to gather quantitative data not available in the secondary sources, such as the reasons for participating in STTP, individuals’ considerations of learning costs, their opinions on the value of lifelong learning, etc. The ability of the questionnaire approach to answer ‘what’ questions can be considered as both an advantage and a disadvantage. In other words, the questionnaire provided a systematic picture of people’s participation in STTP, and it could also identify the extent of different groups’ orientations to the labour market competition and its intensity; however, it could not provide adequate explanations of the situation and how individual’s perception were formed and changed. So, in this research, the questionnaire fieldwork could be seen as a useful way to help me setting up possible themes, constructs and topics to be explored in-depth in the qualitative data collection and analysis.

¹¹ The number of the returned questionnaire was actually 306. However, unfortunately, there are 27 invalid ones, in which the respondents ticked the same box on the likert-scale for all the items.

Figure 4.5.2a The key questions and focus for the questionnaire fieldwork

Investigating the general features and patterns of motivations for participating in STTP and attitudes towards the labour market competition in Shanghai
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The (personal and social) characteristics of STTP course participants, in terms of age, gender, educational level, occupation, working position and geographical origins; - Participants' motivations for attending the STTP courses; - Participants' perceptions of the value of the programme and the qualifications provided; - Participants' perceptions of competition in the Shanghai labour market; and - The correlation between the personal and social features of the courses' participants and the patterns in their perceptions and attitudes.

-- Constructing the questionnaire

After identifying the questionnaire as the most appropriate strategy at this stage, I constructed the questionnaire by considering the following issues:

- Who constituted the population and how to select the samples;
- What type of questionnaire to use;
- How to design the detailed questions;
- How to pilot and then conduct the questionnaire; and
- What were the ethical issues and how to deal with them.

-- Sampling

In line with the questionnaire aims and focus, the targeted population at this research stage was all course participants, both past and present. Ideally, those who had already participated in and completed the STTP courses and assessment would have more insights or an overall and retrospective view of their experience in STTP. For example, the past participants could reveal and compare their expectations of STTP before taking the course and their actual experience in the labour market competition. However, the sampling decision also depended on permitted and practicable access to the population. The duration of each STTP course is usually about six months. After students finished their courses, it would be difficult to gain access to them, as the STTP management did not keep past students' information. In other words, it was easier to approach the current course participants. In this case, the students who were currently taking the various

STTP courses became the sample framework. The sample was selected from those participants taking the courses in October 2004, with 47.0% of the respondents studying the translation courses, 12.5% attending the management courses, 14.7% taking class in computer science, 19.4% taking their accounting courses and 3.9% claiming their participation in logistics.

A stratified sampling strategy was adopted. Theoretically, by using this strategy, the proportion of different groups in the whole population can be reflected (Bryman, 2001; Cohen, *et al*, 2000). There were two steps to organising the stratified random sampling in this questionnaire. The first step was to identify the different proportions of participants in different STTP courses; and the second step was to randomly select the sample according to these proportions. The secondary data analysis showed different number of participants in different courses in STTP, and the difference was quite large. For example, although the statistics were not so accurate, the English-Chinese interpretation courses, computing courses and financial accountancy courses were the most popular (STTP head office, 2005). Logistics courses and senior management courses were newly developed and were the second most popular group of courses. Therefore, I focused on delivering the questionnaire mainly in five courses, i.e. English-Chinese interpretation course, financial accountancy course, computing course, logistics course and senior management course. Altogether, 279 students returned usable questionnaires. More specifically,

-- The type of the questionnaire

Again, due to practical issues, a self-completed questionnaire was delivered in this research, rather than telephone or mail survey, or face-to-face interviews. As mentioned earlier, as an outsider to the STTP organization, it was difficult for me to get approval from the STTP head office (as part of the governmental organization) to conduct this research, let alone to obtain students' personal information like home or email address and telephone number. Furthermore, the STTP courses had adopted a marketized system in terms of management. Some of the courses were sub-contracted to individual institutions. Due to these issues, I tried to approach individual institutions personally¹². Once permitted by the institutions, a number of hard-copy questionnaires were given

¹² This approach of accessing samples became especially useful after the STTP head office turned me down.

out according to the size or scale of the institution and the courses they ran. A week later, I went back to the institutions to collect the returned questionnaires.

-- Designing the questions in the questionnaire

A review of the underlying theories informing this research (i.e. human capital theory, positional competition theory, rational choice theory and theories on lifelong learning) and some other relevant research on individual commitment or participation in lifelong learning (such as Alison, 1994; Davies and Bynner, 2000; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Sargant, *et al*, 2002) facilitated me in clarifying the key conceptual definitions for this research and their possible interactive relationship. The four key areas of concern here are the motivations for participating in lifelong learning, the motivations for attending STTP, the factors affecting labour market competition and specifically the role of qualifications. It is helpful to differentiate lifelong learning and the education and training programme STTP in this questionnaire fieldwork. Although STTP is officially defined as a lifelong learning programme, 'lifelong learning' is still a relatively new concept or term in people's daily life in China. Rather than presenting any particular definition, it was useful to ask about lifelong learning and STTP separately to see the respondents' actual understanding of the value of STTP.

I then operationalized these constructs and their inter-relationships into a specific set of testable hypotheses and variables, to be addressed by appropriate specific measurement techniques and procedures (Bryman, 2001; May, 2001). Firstly, I developed these concepts into a series of statements, which could be identified with or were underpinned by the underlying theories of this research. For example, the motivations for STTP could be accounted for from different theoretical perspectives, that is, human capital theory and positional competition theory. Referring to these theories, I set up a series of statements (See Figure 4.5.2b). Meanwhile, some statements drawn from my knowledge of Chinese culture or characteristics were also added, since these elements might not be included in the western social theories, as argued previously.

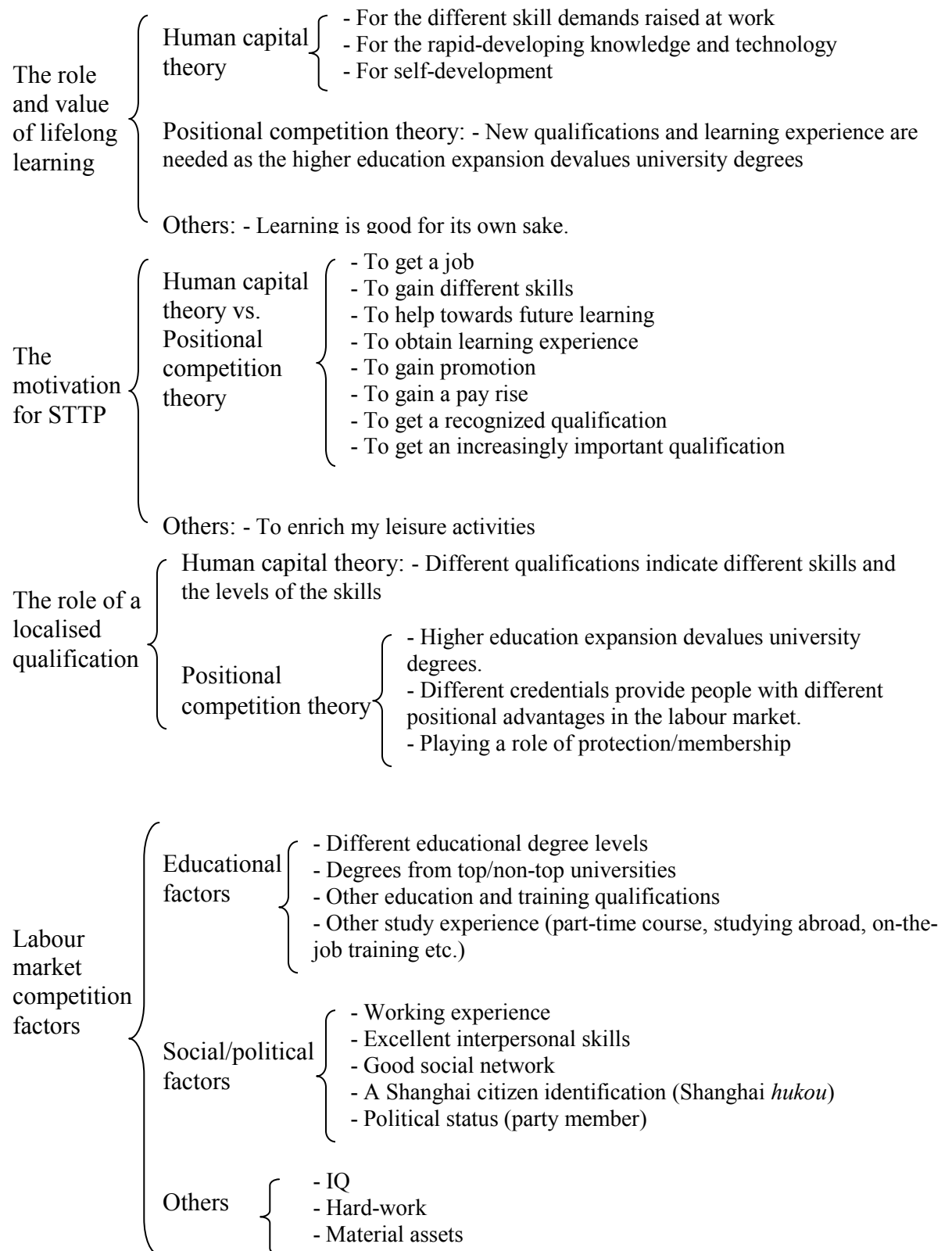
Based on these operationalized hypotheses and variables, the questionnaire was designed in five main sections: respondents' current participation in STTP; motivations for participating in STTP; respondents' perceived value of STTP; respondents'

perception of lifelong learning and qualifications, related to the Shanghai labour market competition; and finally personal information.

The questionnaire was intended to produce quantitative data, such as what percentage of participants took the course for improving their personal skills. The majority of the items were closed, using multiple choices and rating scale formats. Closed items can be easier to use by both researcher and respondents, are straightforward to code and analyze, and can permit comparability between people's answers (Cohen, *et al*, 2000; May, 2001). However, closed questions also bring drawbacks as they do not enable respondents to add any remarks or explanations to the fixed categories. That is, their validity, in terms of the extent to which they access fully the respondents' real views, is dependent on the 'operationalization' process. Moreover, different people may have different understanding of the same statement and the application of the rating scale. It must also be borne in mind that some respondents will take the questionnaire task more seriously than others. Open questions were also added to each section, such as 'is there anything else you think important (why you chose to study this STTP course)'. This allowed me to gain data on aspects of the respondents' views which might have been missed out in the process of operationalizing the conceptual definitions. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they would be interested in being interviewed as a subsequent research stage. Only those who would like to be contacted would fill in their personal information at this section.

The use of language is another issue in designing this questionnaire. I first designed this questionnaire in English, so as to get feedback and suggestions from my supervisor. It was translated into Chinese afterwards.

Figure 4.5.2b Operationalizing the key conceptual definitions



-- Piloting and conducting the questionnaire fieldwork

The questionnaire (in Chinese) was piloted in summer 2004 with 10 ex-course participants. The intention of the pilot questionnaire was to ascertain whether the questions were clear and understandable and whether there was anything missing. The pilot study revealed that some of the terminology was too technical for people who had little knowledge or background in sociology and education. The wording of the questions was altered a little; and some notes or footnotes were added to aid respondents' understanding of the questions.

Both the English version and the Chinese version were sent to two critical friends for comments on the translation. Although it was suggested that some of the questions in English might seem similar especially after being translated into Chinese, these questions were still kept to assist with testing the reliability of the responses.

As was discussed earlier, the questionnaire was administered in Oct, 2004 when the new cohort of students started their courses. With permission from the institutions involved, I gave the questionnaires to the administrators who helped me to deliver them to students. Moreover, in those institutions which allowed me to approach students, I went to the class to introduce my research, which hopefully would inspire their interests in participating. I came back to these institutions to collect the returned questionnaires after one week.

-- The questionnaire data analysis and the limitations of the questionnaire

The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed with the aid of SPSS. First, a descriptive analysis was carried out to produce overall descriptive accounts of people's motivations for attending the course and the general view on lifelong learning and the labour market competition. Second, inferential statistics were used to identify tendencies and correlations between respondents' perceptions and their demographic and social characteristics.

Briefly, the questionnaire findings showed that 1) people from different social backgrounds tended to have both similarities and differences in terms of their motivations for the STTP courses; 2) people from different social backgrounds tended to have quite different opinions and perceptions on the labour market competition; and 3)

people from different social backgrounds tended to have quite similar opinions on the value and the role of lifelong learning. (The detailed analysis will be presented in the Chapter 6.) However, such statistics could not explain why these differences or similarities occurred. Also, it could not fully take the interaction between agency and structure into account, which I believe to be vital to understand individuals' decision-making in participating in the localized STTP courses. In particular, how were the respondents' views on the labour market competition related to their views on lifelong learning and their participation in such learning? What were the individuals' experiences? It confirmed again that a qualitative approach was needed to explore how these perceptions were formed.

4.6 Phase two: qualitative data collection and analysis

The qualitative phase of data collection was implemented in the summer and winter of 2005. From the quantitative data, a general systematic picture of participation in STTP and views on the labour market competition was obtained. However, I still lacked knowledge of the processes taking place within this picture. In this sense, the main objective of this qualitative approach was to generate and explore in-depth data, so as to understand better the findings from the quantitative data. Moreover, the quantitative data analysis showed there were relationships between participants' social background and the opinions they held. This qualitative approach, therefore, aimed to explore further different people's perceptions and thinking on STTP, lifelong learning and the labour market competition. 'Why' and 'how' questions became the foci at this stage, such as why the higher education degree holders agreed more than those without a higher degree that the attraction of STTP was from its localized qualification, and why respondents with less work experience tended to be of a similar opinion with more work experience. The investigation of different opinions at this research stage was not only limited to the STTP participants from different social backgrounds, but also extended to a comparison of views between its participants, non-participants (with similar social backgrounds to the participants) and those at the policy-making level. The aim was to develop a holistic view on the STTP programme from a range of stakeholders.

The qualitative data from the qualitative approach could also play a role of triangulation and increasing reliability and validity for this research as a whole. (See Figure 4.6a)

Figure 4.6 The key questions and focus for the interview fieldwork

Investigating in depth stakeholders' perceptions (the course participants, non-participants and the people at the policy-making level) of STTP, lifelong learning and the labour market competition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the situation of the job market in Shanghai? - What are the factors that determine an individual's success, in terms of study and jobs, etc? (Degree, the level of the institution, geographical origin, working experience, social capital elements, etc.) - What are their experiences in the labour market competition? - How do they view the value of STTP and its qualification? - How did they decide to attend these courses? - What do they think is lifelong learning? - How different are perceptions of people from different groups, especially in terms of age, educational background, occupation, etc.? - Why do they have such differences? What factors lead to it? - How do they feel and experience the competition in the labour market? - How do they cope with the competition? - How have they tried to make use of the qualifications achieved from STTP?

4.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviewing is defined as maintaining and generating conversations with people on a specific topic or range of topics. The interviewee's answers constitute the raw data analyzed and interpreted at a later point in time by the researcher (May, 2001). Interviews can yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, aspirations, attitudes and feelings (Sarantakos, 1998; Bryman, 2001; May, 2001). From the range of types of interviews available, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were adopted as the most appropriate and practical method to collect data in this qualitative approach.

Semi-structured interviews are considered flexible in nature. Interview questions are normally specified with a relatively clear interview schedule, but the interviewer is freer to clarify and elaborate answers given and to record qualitative information about the topic. In this sense, semi-structured interviews can allow respondents to tell lengthy

stories and answer more on their own terms, thus allowing deeper probing into the topic (Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller and O'Connor, 1993; May, 2001). After attaining a general picture of individuals' participation in STTP through phase one of this research, a series of specific and relatively straightforward research aims and focus were formed for the further qualitative research. A clear structure was needed to guide and permit comparability between different responses (May, 2001). Meanwhile, adequate space would be allowed and assured for the interviewees to express their opinions and experiences fully. It was an opportunity to build up richer and deeper understanding related to the research questions.

Taking cultural issues into consideration, semi-structured interviews are considered to be more suitable than the other types of interviews in this research, such as focus group. The content of the interview fieldwork includes certain sensitive questions, for example employment situations. Chinese people in particular may feel restrained in a focus group situation if asked to reveal and discuss personal information with a group of strangers. The other reason why the semi-structured interviews were chosen rather than a focus group was practical. Most of the STTP courses were 6-month duration. Course participants came from different background, i.e. schools, universities, companies, etc. Those answering the questionnaire in autumn 2004 would have finished the course by summer 2005. To gather together groups of them at same time would be difficult. Furthermore, in relation to interviews with policy-makers because of my limited social capital, it would be difficult for me to get full access to policy-makers, let alone gather several policy-makers together and carry out a group interview in a socially hierarchical context.

4.6.2 Designing the interview schedules

The interview schedules were written in March-April 2005 after consulting the literature on interviewing (Rubin, 1995; Cohen *et al*, 2000; Gubrium, 2002) and other relevant research (Hand *et al*, 1994; Coffield, 1999a; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). This coincided with the end of my initial analysis of the questionnaire data. In line with the objectives and focus of the interview fieldwork, separate interview schedules were prepared for the three main groups; that is, course participants, non-participants and policy-makers. Further, after the analysis of the questionnaire data, the extent to which individual course participants could be considered to be 'typical' or

‘representative’ was judged and identified in terms of their age, educational level, geographical origins, working positions and status (students or working). Among the groups of course participants and non-participants, four interview schedules were designed and divided into student course participants and working course participants, and student non-participants and working non-participants. The fifth and sixth interview schedules were designed for the interviews with policy-makers and those who were involved in delivering the STTP courses (See table 4.6.2).

Table 4.6.2 Six interview schedules

	Course participants	Non-participants
Students	Interview schedule 1	Interview schedule 2
People who were working	Interview schedule 3	Interview schedule 4
Interview schedule 5: Policy-makers		
Interview schedule 6: People who were involved in delivering the courses		

Bearing in mind one of the interview purposes of comparing different groups’ perceptions, a general structure for the interview questions was formed, consisting of six major parts. First, a brief introduction introduced the interview and the research and also asked for the interviewee’s consent including consent to be recorded. Second, questions were asked on perceptions of the situation in the Shanghai job market. Third, questions were asked on what kinds of factors determine a person’s success in the labour market. Following this, the interviews explored the interviewee’s views on lifelong learning and participation or non-participation in STTP. Fifth, questions focused on views of educational qualifications and credentials. Finally, the interviewee’s understanding of lifelong learning was revisited. Specific questions in the six parts were designed according to the different interview groups. The questions were mostly open-ended, to create space for interviewees to express themselves, to allow flexibility and to allow the interviewer to probe and clarify misunderstandings (Cohen, *et al*, 2000). The interview schedule was written in English and translated into Chinese after feedback and suggestion from my supervisor. The interviews were to be conducted in Chinese.

4.6.3 Reflections on the pilot interview

Pilot interviews were conducted at the University of Bath. The aim was to see if all the interview questions were answerable, clear and comprehensible and to see if there were any leading questions (Cohen, *et al*, 2000; Bryman, 2001). Also, it could be seen as an opportunity to train and self-check my interview skills.

I emailed Chinese students in this university who had taken the STTP courses¹³ and who might not have taken them but were from Shanghai or used to study in Shanghai. Three pilot interviews were implemented. It turned out that the questions were easily understandable. However, the piloting showed the need to pay attention to how to ask questions which involved ‘technical’ terms, such as lifelong learning. It seemed that people could understand its meaning by looking at the Chinese character and could guess the meaning from the term; however, they might have no idea if I asked directly ‘could you tell me how you understand lifelong learning’. So I changed the questions and also made notes next to the question to remind myself.

Another purpose of the pilot interviews was to decide the best order in which to ask questions. The interview questions were asked in different orders in these three pilot interviews. It turned out to be easier and better to start the interview with the broader questions on the interviewee’s perceptions of the Shanghai labour market, and then narrow down to the specific questions on their own experience and opinions of STTP. This agrees with advice given by Cohen, *et al* (2000). So the question order was decided as 1) a brief introduction of the interview itself and the research → 2) questions on perceptions and experiences in the job market in Shanghai → 3) the perceived factors determining a person’s success → 4) views on participation/non-participation in the STTP courses → 5) views on the qualifications → and 6) their understanding of lifelong learning. However, it was worth reminding myself that it might not be a fixed order, and it could be adapted to the responses from different interviewees.

4.6.4 Conducting the interviews

Altogether, nineteen interviews were conducted in the summer and winter of 2005, comprising eleven interviews with the course participants, four interviews with the non-

¹³ I deliberately emailed the interpreting course at the Department of European Studies. In the email, I asked if any student participated in the interpretation course in STTP before.

participants, and four interviews with the people at policy-making level and those who were involved in delivering the courses.

Seventeen out of the nineteen interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees¹⁴. After each interview, the record was listened to. I then wrote down some questions on topics which had been overlooked or which turned out to be interesting but were not pursued in depth. These questions were emailed to the interviewees to seek more explanation and clarification.

When I was interviewing policy-makers, I felt my interviewing technique was restricted. This was due to my status as a student researcher in the presence of someone much higher in a socio-cultural hierarchy. This weakness may have affected the quality and the depth of the interviews with these policy-makers to some extent, although a clear detailed interview schedule was found useful in these interviews.

4.6.5 Interview samples

Purposive sampling was used in selecting the STTP course participants and those people at the policy-making level; and snowballing sampling was employed to select non-participants. First, eleven course participants who had completed the questionnaire were selected for the further interviews. As mentioned earlier, the selection of these interviewees was based on the background factors and variables identified from the questionnaire data analysis. Specifically, the interviewees were deliberately chosen for the purposes of exploring differences between people of different ages, different educational levels, elite university and non-elite university, students and working people, Shanghai local citizens and non-local citizens and so on. Interviewees were chosen to achieve different combination or the identified influential background variables. The initial selection of the interviewees was of course determined by their willingness to be interviewed which was indicated at the end of the questionnaire.

Second, I used my limited social connections to approach four people who were involved in planning and designing the STTP programme. Third, the four non-participants interviewees were chosen by means of snow-balling sampling strategy. On agreeing to be interviewed, the course participants were also invited to introduce a non-

¹⁴ One of the interviewees, a policy-maker, did not like the interview to be recorded; and the other policy-maker interviewee was met by chance when I visited a friend and was without recoding equipment.

participant friend who shared common features with the participants, such as age, working position, educational level and geographic origins. Table 4.6.5 lists the interviewees' background information.

Table 4.6.5 Interview samples

A. The course-participant interviewees						
No.	Gender	Age	Educational level	The status of college/university	Current status	Geographical origin
1	F	22	Undergraduate	Non-elite	Newly graduated	Non-Shanghai
2	F	21	Undergraduate	Elite	Student	Shanghai
3	M	22	Undergraduate	Elite	Newly graduated	Shanghai
4	F	22	Undergraduate	Non-elite	Newly graduated	Shanghai
5	M	26	Postgraduate	Elite	Student	Non-Shanghai
6	F	25	College	Non-elite	Working	Shanghai
7	F	26	Undergraduate	Non-elite	Working	Shanghai
8	M	32	College	Non-elite	Working	Shanghai
9	M	44	Undergraduate	Elite	Working	Shanghai
10	M	36	Postgraduate	Studied abroad	Working	Shanghai
11	M	27	Postgraduate	Studied abroad	Working	Shanghai

B. The non-participant interviewees						
No.	Gender	Age	Educational level	The level of the school	Current status	Geographical origin
12	M	20	Undergraduate	Elite	Student	Non-Shanghai
13	M	25	Undergraduate	Elite	Working	Shanghai
14	F	28	Postgraduate	Studied abroad	Working	Shanghai
15	M	37	Postgraduate	Non-elite	Working	Shanghai

C. The interviewees involved in planning and designing the STTP programme			
No.	Gender	Age	Position
16	M	50s	Directing and coordinating one major field of the STTP courses
17	M	40s	Government official in human resource section
18	M	30s	Managing another training programme similar to STTP
19	F	40s	Teaching one of the STTP courses for over 10 years

4.6.6 The interview data analysis

The interview data analysis was carried out in several steps: transcribing, summarising the individual interviews, coding, cross analysing and analysing individual cases.

-- Transcription of the data

As argued by Cohen *et al* (2000), transcribing the interviews was the first crucial step in analysing interviews. This could have the potential for massive data loss, distortion and the reduction of complexity, as the interviews take place in a social setting which is not itself transcribable. Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) suggest that different information or kinds of data are recorded in the transcript of the interviews according to the aims of the study. I, therefore, noted other data, such as emphases placed by the interviewees, the mood and the inflection of the interviewees, etc. These kinds of data could help me to understand and contextualize their speaking. All the interviews were transcribed by myself. This permits me to examine repeatedly the interviewees' answers, and also helps me to become more familiar with these data (Bryman, 2001). A brief summary of each interview was written at the end of the transcription.

No interviews were translated into English. The analysis of the interview data was carried out in Chinese. Bearing in mind that translation might change or lose some original meaning of the text to some extent, I translated only some parts of the interviews during writing up the data analysis. It enabled me to analyze the data more efficiently (because in Chinese, my first language) and greater confidence in the reliability of the data I was working with and the validity of my understanding.

-- Thematic coding of the interview data

Conceptualising and coding is an integral process in analysing qualitative data (Neuman, 2000). It involves the researcher's creating themes or concepts and organising the raw

data into conceptual categories. These themes and concepts will be used to further analyze data. This process is guided by the research aims and questions, and may also lead to new emergent questions. Strauss (1987) defines three steps in qualitative data coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. These three steps were used in this study.

According to Strauss (1987), *open coding* entails locating themes and assigning initial codes to organize the raw data into categories. In the interview data coding, I firstly set up a series of key topics derived from the research questions and the interview questions. Secondly, slowly reading the transcriptions, I wrote preliminary concepts or labels on the edge of the paper next to the relevant passages. Certain potential quotes were also highlighted as being succinct statements of particular points. During this stage, I was keeping myself reflective by identifying and relating these quotes, phrases and words to the theoretical points underpinning this study. Doing so helped me to bring themes to the surface from deep inside the data (Neuman, 2000). However, it did not necessarily limit or prevent me from identifying emerging concepts and themes. Thirdly, all the concepts listed were organized, sorted, combined and categorized into the series of the topics identified earlier, which would be extended in the further data analysis.

Axial coding focuses on the initial coded concepts and themes from the open coding stage, rather than on the raw data (Neuman, 2000). After the initial codes were reviewed and examined, the axes of key concepts, ideas and themes in analysis were identified. During this process, concepts, ideas and themes were clustered and combined into different sub-dimensions, such as causes and consequences, strategies and processes. This could stimulate thinking about linkages and relationships between different concepts and themes. It also stimulated identification of significant for discussion in this study.

The third step of *selective coding* involved selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This coding process also included making comparisons and contrasts among all the data collected. This step led to overall analysis of the core generalizations and ideas (Neuman, 2000).

Table 4.6.6 shows the two examples of coding and sorting out the answers to the interview questions.

Table 4.6.6 Examples of coding and sorting out the interview data

The key interview questions	The codes and categories: responses to the questions were coded and sorted into	
	Preset codes and categories	Emergent codes and categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the key factors impacting on individual competition in the labour market? - How to find a good job? - How do the interviewees actually view those factors? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Degree levels - University levels - Working experience - The type of the companies - Geographical origins - Social Capital - Political factors - Gender 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-judgement and recognition - Pressure - Luck - <i>'Heart-attitude'</i> (This notion – <i>xintai</i> - will be further discussed in the data analysis chapter)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do they mean by 'skills' and 'abilities'? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional skills - Language skills - Interpersonal skills - Qualifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moral and ethical - Hard-working - Smart - Comprehensive skills - Desire for learning - <i>'Heart attitude'</i>

The coding and categorising of the responses from the interviews, a traditional theme-oriented method of analysing qualitative data, helped to summarize and analyze the interviews. It located distinct themes across interviews and synthesized separate pictures to answer the research questions (Chase, 2005). However, one of the research aims was to look at the inter-relationship between people's perceptions of and motivations towards lifelong learning and its certification on the one hand and their experience of competing in the labour market on the other. Merely coding categories and putting them into different themes was not sufficient to create a holistic picture to achieve this aim. It was found difficult to separate an interviewee's view on the value of lifelong learning and his or her talk about motivations (or de-motivations) for participating in STTP, or from his or her social background, which also led to an understanding of his or her experience in the labour market. Under this circumstance, more focus on the

connections among these key topics was required, which indicated the use of narrative analysis.

-- *Narrative analysis*

Narrative analysis is defined and recognized as a means of examining the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives within a changing socio-historical context (Phinney, 2000, in Daiute and Lightfoot, 2003). One of its strengths identified by social science researchers is the theoretical complexity and methodological diversity it can encompass (Riessman, 1993; Daiute and Lightfoot, 2003; Chase, 2005).

The main purpose of narrative analysis is to understand and explore how interviewees impose order on the flow of their stories and past experience to make retrospective meaning of events and actions in their lives. It is a way of understanding and organising events and objects into a meaningful whole and connecting and seeing the consequences of actions over time (Chase, 2005). Also, analysis of narratives not only involves looking at experience and content told, but also includes how and why the story was told in that way (Riessman, 1993). Furthermore, narrative, as a form of verbal action, is viewed as a socially and culturally situated interactive performance. While the ‘story-teller’ (the interviewee) shapes and construct the self and experience, the audience (the interviewer) also produces and interprets the performance for his or her particular research purposes.

Bell (1988, in Riessman, 1993) offers one model of narrative analysis. The model consists of three steps. The first step is to identify the narrative segments. The segments may differ in nature as narrative data can come from a variety of sources and be elicited in many forms (Taylor-Powell and Renner, 2003). It can be a short topical story about a specific event, an extended story about a significant aspect of one’s life or a narrative of one’s entire life from birth to the present (*ibid*). In this research, narrative data were produced through individual interviews in the forms of notes and word-for-word transcripts. The interviewees were asked about specific aspects of their lives, such as their experience of participating in the STTP courses and lifelong learning and their experience in the labour market. These specific aspects were identified as narrative segments in this research.

The second step is to determine what aspects of narrative serve as the basis or core for interpretations. Based on the transcript, developmental graphs were drawn for each interviewee by utilising the codes and categories identified in the previous cross-case analysis. By doing so, it was possible to recognize relational components and indicate the connections among the different aspects of their lives. This step is also called 'reducing the story to a core' (Riessman, 1993). And the third step is to determine what the narrative means. This involved examining how the interviewee chose the words and sentences to tell his or her story, how the sequence of one episode of action were related to the other, how they presented who they were and what they had done, and how the story was related to external context. However, it might lead to one potential limitation of this approach in terms of the issues of reliability and validity; that is, how credible the stories were (Chase, 2005).

4.7 Phase three: integrating and combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis

The third and the final research phase was to compare, integrate and combine the two data-sets, quantitative and qualitative, so as to answer the research questions. At the same time, it was another way of checking and triangulating the different research data to reach a reliable and valid conclusion. I started this research phase by comparing the quantitative and qualitative findings, particularly to check whether there were any contradictions between these findings and what factors and reasons generated such contradictions. For example, while the quantitative findings showed the respondents' relatively positive feedbacks on the STTP courses, the qualitative findings revealed the individuals' concerns on the quality of the courses. As the two sets of data were collected at different stages of the individuals' participation in the STTP courses, integrating these data helped me to find and understand the changes of their views, in relation to the individuals' experience in the labour market competition and in the STTP programme. On integrating and combining these two sets of data, I went back to the research questions and made sure that all the research questions had been answered.

4.8 Ethical issues

Three ethical issues need to be taken into account in both the questionnaire and the interview fieldwork: informed consent, confidentiality, privacy and anonymity. To acquire people's cooperation in this research, I managed to do the following. First, at the very beginning of the questionnaire and the interview, I briefly introduced this research. Secondly, I stated clearly the following issues:

- All respondents and interviewees were asked for their informed consent;
- Respondents were entitled to withdraw this questionnaire and the interview at any time;
- Respondents made their own decision whether to complete particular items or not in this questionnaire and to answer the interview questions; and
- Confidentiality and non-traceability were ensured.

Thirdly, the order of the questions in a questionnaire can serve an important role in approaching sensitive questions (Cohen, *et al*, 2000). The personal information, such as age, salary, educational and working background, was requested in the final section in this questionnaire. And finally, after the fifth section of personal information, some blank space was left for respondents who would be willing to take further interviews to leave their names and contact details. Once again, consent whether to take part or not was left in the respondents' hands.

4.9 Reliability and validity

The concepts of reliability and validity can be used as important criteria to judge the quality of any research. Reliability essentially means consistency over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents (Cohen, *et al*, 2000). Validity denotes if the research instruments or strategies measure what they are supposed to measure. A number of means were employed in this research to ensure acceptable levels of reliability and validity were obtained.

Reliability was mainly achieved by methodological triangulation. The detailed description of the reasons for combining quantitative and qualitative approaches has been discussed earlier in this chapter. Different methodological approaches were

adopted in this study – quantitative approach facilitating qualitative approach, and qualitative approach complementing quantitative approach. A mix of methods was used too, that is, the secondary data analysis, questionnaire and interviews.

A number of strategies helped achieve high levels of validity in this research. Again a mix of quantitative and qualitative approach ensured the methodological validity. Quantitative approach provided with key issues and an overall descriptive view of people's participation in the STTP programme and their views on the labour market competition; while qualitative approach answered in-depth questions of why and how people managed their learning and their employment seeking. At the research design stage, trialling and piloting of the questionnaire and the interview schedules ensured that the questions would gather the data that this research purports to gather. Meanwhile, my supervisor and the other critical friends gave me suggestions and opinions on the questionnaire and the interview schedule. After the fieldwork, transcriptions were conducted immediately, and the copies were sent back to the interviewees for checking (but not all the interviewees returned their feedbacks). At the data analysis stage, mixed methods provided multiple sources of data, such as the governmental policies and documents, the course-participants' questionnaire, and the interviews with participants, non-participants and the people at the policy-making level. These multiple sources of data enabled me to access a wide range of perspectives; to compare both similarities and differences among different respondents; to compare and validate the research findings.

4.10 Limitations of the research design

The limitations of this study are recognized. These arise mainly from the sampling for the questionnaire and the interview. The researcher's lack of appropriate social capital brings difficulties which were not expected in the first place. Without knowing people in the STTP organization, it was hard for the researcher to gain access to the course participants. Second, because of the limited access to the course participants, the sample of the questionnaire fieldwork was mainly from those most popular and more frequently-delivered courses. Moreover, different courses in STTP target different group of students, in terms of their age, working experience and so on. Thus, further studies can be recommended to deliver the questionnaire to a wider range of participants.

Third, although the different data-set and research methods could help to improve the reliability of the research findings, this study yet focused on the course participants in the year of 2004-2005. This focus may limit evaluation, analysis and discussion on impact of STTP on those participants. As the Chinese economic revolution is still undergoing and developing rapidly, changes in the society also take place tremendously. Only focusing on one year group of participants limited me to explore whether individual perceptions would change over a period of time and to capture the trajectories of their perception change if there is any.

Chapter 5 People's Perceptions of the Labour Market Competition in Shanghai

5.1 Introduction

In the current Chinese context, individuals are delivered two clear messages in terms of constructing and managing their employability. On the one hand, it is promising that the economic boom is producing an increasing number of 'good' jobs. If one invests in one's education and training, one can secure one of these job positions. On the other hand, individuals are expected to take full responsibility for their own employability in the changing world of work, characterized by 'a life of jobs' (Gilbert, 1998) rather than a job for life, with continuous updating of skills and knowledge required. In addition, Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue that generically employers are looking for people who can show their abilities in self-reliance, charisma and teamwork. These messages are circulated through universities, media, company websites, job advertisements, etc. Individuals are also expected and encouraged to develop their employability by promoting their personal skills and knowledge through various forms of learning, such as academic studies, adult education programmes, on-the-job training, etc. But, how do young Chinese understand and manage their employability? What factors do they perceive as contributing to occupational success in a rapidly changing context? How far are these perceptions influencing people's decision-making in participating in education and training and their perceived value of lifelong learning?

Both the questionnaire and the interview fieldwork investigated people's perceptions of the competition in the labour market in Shanghai, their perceptions of lifelong learning and their participation experience in STTP. This first data analysis chapter will focus on people's perceptions of the labour market competition: how they view the newly emerging labour market and how they manage their employability. It will be followed by analysis of the employability strategies deployed by individuals. After obtaining a picture of the labour market competition in Shanghai, the following chapter will discuss individuals' motivations for and perceptions of lifelong learning and STTP in particular.

5.2 Some findings from the questionnaire on the labour market competition in Shanghai

Before the findings are presented in detail, some demographic information on the questionnaire respondents is briefly listed in Table 5.2a: age, gender, educational background, geographical origins, employment status and so on. These demographic factors were taken as independent variables to investigate the variation among different groups of respondents in terms of learning motivations and their perceptions towards lifelong learning and the labour market competition.

Table 5.2a some demographical information of the questionnaire respondents

<i>Demographical factors</i>	Numbers and percentages of the respondents
<i>Age</i>	18-22 years old: 99 (35.4%) 23-26 years old: 120 (42.9%) 27-30 years old: 22 (6.9%) Above 30 years old: 22 (6.9%) (missing data: 16 no response)
<i>Gender</i>	Male: 152 (54.5%) Female: 126 (45.2%) (missing data: 1 no response)
<i>Education background</i>	Doing or holding vocational degree: 5 (1.8%) Doing or holding college degree: 58 (20.7%) Doing or holding university degree: 189 (66.5%) Doing or holding post-graduate degree: 25 (8.9%) (missing data: 2 no response)
<i>Employment status</i>	Students: 100 (35.8%) Employed: 159 (56.9%) Unemployed: 6 (2.1%) (missing data: 14 no response)
<i>Geographical origins</i>	Shanghai citizen: 174 (62.4%) Non-Shanghai citizen: 104 (37.3%) (missing data: 1 no response)

Relating the respondents' age to their student/employment status, non-student respondents were generally older than the student respondents, as might be expected. The age of the student respondents was most commonly 18-22 (84.4%); while that of the majority of non-student respondents was around 23-26 (63.5%). In other words, the questionnaire respondents were largely those who were about to enter the labour market and those who were new labour market entrants (see Table 5.2b).

Table 5.2b Age group and students/non-students.

	Age group								Total
Students/non-students	Group A: 18-20	Group B: 21-22	Group C: 23-24	Group D: 25-26	Group E: 27-28	Group F: 29-30	Group G: 31-35	Group H: >36	
Students	19	63	11	3	0	0	0	0	96
Non-students	3	15	55	45	17	4	12	8	159
Total	22	78	66	48	17	4	12	8	255

It is important to note that the variable 'age' in this research is employed more than just for its 'face value' of indicating the younger group and the elder group. Given the radical nature and rapid rate of change in recent Chinese history, different age groups of people have experienced quite different historical and social changes, such as the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, economic reform from a planned economy to a marketized economy since 1980s and higher education expansion since the late 1990s. These historical and social changes, as mentioned in the previous chapters, may influence the perceptions of different groups. In a context of rapid social change, as in China, age may carry more significance than it does in relatively more stable societies. This will be explored further in the qualitative data analysis.

The factor of gender was also taken into consideration in the questionnaire design and data analysis. It is perhaps significant to note, however, that the finding revealed there were no statistically significant differences between male and female respondents' opinions on the issues that were investigated.

In the questionnaire, a range of factors or conditions which might influence people's position in the labour market competition was identified from the relevant literature (Brown, 2000). Mainly, these factors could be divided into three groups, namely,

educational/cultural capital, social/political capital and personal qualities. More specifically:

-- Education/culture capital: a bachelor degree; a higher degree (Master, PhD); a higher education degree from elite universities; other qualifications apart from those of the full-time education; experience of studying abroad; and realization and motivation for lifelong learning.

-- Social/political capital: political status; a Shanghai citizen identification (*'hukou'*); social networks; and work experience.

-- Personal qualities: IQ level; interpersonal skills and willingness to work hard.

The respondents were asked to rate the importance of each factor in terms of gaining employment on a scale of 1 to 4 (please see Table 5.2c on page 116).

From table 5.2c, it can be argued that most of the factors identified were rated quite positively, except 'political status' and 'a Shanghai citizen identification'. Moreover, the factors perceived most positively were 'a bachelor degree', 'a degree from elite universities', 'rich work experience', 'excellent interpersonal skills', 'hard-working' and 'good social network'. Response differences between different groups (age, gender, educational background and work experience) were not statistically significant except in one case: student respondents tended to rate the role of other qualifications apart from those from full-time education more positively than the working respondents (chi-square test, $p=0.004$). Possession of the Shanghai citizen identification was rated as being of relatively little importance in the labour market competition. In other words, the Shanghai citizen identification was perceived not to play a significant membership role in protecting the employment of the Shanghai citizens. Under this circumstance, we could argue that the unimportant role of *'hukou'* might lead to an increasingly intensive competition between Shanghai citizens and non-Shanghai citizens.

With these initial findings, the interview fieldwork aimed to find out how the labour market competition was perceived by different groups of interviewees, how these factors were perceived to work in the competition and how people managed the competition in their own lives. The following data analysis will be conducted according to different groups of participants, namely, students and graduates, working people, and managers and policy-makers.

Table 5.2c Response to the questionnaire item: ‘What elements do you think a person needs to obtain, to enable them to compete in the Shanghai labour market, especially for those high-salary and high-ranking jobs?’ Scale 1 (the least important) to 4 (the most important)

The Factors Identified	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentile	
a higher degree (Master, and PhD)	1	4	2.98	.70	25 50 75	3 3 3
a bachelor degree	1	4	3.10	.68	25 50 75	3 3 4
a higher education degree from elite universities	1	4	3.01	.66	25 50 75	3 3 3
other qualifications apart from those of the full time education	1	4	2.87	.62	25 50 75	3 3 3
study experience abroad	1	4	2.73	.70	25 50 75	2 3 3
realization and motivation for lifelong learning	1	4	2.72	.76	25 50 75	2 3 3
rich working experience	2	4	3.48	.59	25 50 75	3 4 4
To be hard-working	1	4	3.34	.60	25 50 75	3 3 4
excellent interpersonal skills	1	4	3.43	.61	25 50 75	3 3 4
political status	1	4	2.20	.79	25 50 75	2 2 3
Good social network	1	4	3.17	.65	25 50 75	3 3 4
a Shanghai citizen identification	1	4	2.40	.78	25 50 75	2 2 3
High IQ	1	4	2.76	.76	25 50 75	2 3 3

5.3 The perceptions of the students and graduate interviewees

This section will present the student interviewees' view points on the labour market competition, including those who were about to graduate and were seeking jobs. Altogether, six students were interviewed. Here, a small section is needed to introduce the interviewees in detail, enabling us to understand better their opinions and perceptions of the labour market competition. The following part will briefly introduce their backgrounds and some personal stories related to their experience in the labour market.

Tangyue

Tangyue was 22, and was about to graduate from a non-elite university in Shanghai, where she was majored in finance and investment. Tangyue's family came originally from a small city outside Shanghai, and moved to Shanghai during Tangyue's university study. All of them had a Shanghai *hukou*. Both her parents were teachers.

Tangyue felt she was at a disadvantage in terms of competing in the labour market, as her degree would be from a non-elite university. She did not do well in the university entrance exam, and felt depressed and demotivated to study in her first two years in the university. Not until the third year, did she realize *'I could not be like this any more and have to make some change for myself'*. Her decision was to participate in some extra learning outside the university and at the same time to attend the postgraduate entrance exams. Tangyue was not making a great effort in seeking jobs, as she was busy preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam; she had just been to a few careers fairs. But she had a chance to apply for a position in a commercial bank as the person who was supposed to take the job position suddenly declined the job offer.

At this time, Tangyue had two offers. One offer was for the position in the commercial bank in Shanghai; and the other was for a place for postgraduate study in an elite university. She was hesitating to make a decision, as she was interested in both. She would love to work and to start her career in a bank; at the same time, she would like to stay in an academic setting. Tangyue was interested in studying English, in particular translation and interpretation between Chinese and English. However, the offer she got for her postgraduate study was pure English literature studies, which made her feel a

little awkward and *'uncomfortable'*. The decision had not been made, but Tangyue mentioned she would probably accept the job offer. She also emphasized that she would not stop learning even after work, as she was from a 'teacher' family and learning was of great importance to her.

Xiaomei

Xiaomei, 22, was a third-year university student in a top normal university. The family was originally from Shanghai, but her parents were sent to work in a southern province during the period of the Cultural Revolution. Thanks to the changing policy, she managed to get a Shanghai *hukou*, moved back and studied in a local senior school in Shanghai. She was first enrolled in the Department of Mechanical Engineering in a non-elite university in Shanghai, as she *'did not do well in the university entrance exam'*. She decided to withdraw from the course and re-sat in the entrance exam in the following year. At this time, she was studying physics teaching in a normal university in Shanghai.

Due to her academic background as well as her interests, she would like to become a teacher and find a job in a senior school after her graduation. She had not been to any careers fair yet; but she knew the competition in the labour market was very intense. Xiaomei had obtained her information from the media and from the senior students in her university.

Yijin

Yijin was 23 and was about to graduate from an elite university in Shanghai. His major was electronic engineering. His family was from Shanghai. He had obtained a job in the Shanghai branch of a well-known foreign IT company. He was very pleased with himself and with this position in such a prestigious company. Yijin did not go to any careers fairs outside the university, as *'lots of good companies would come and recruit students directly from our university; ... and elite universities tend to have more advantages and opportunities (than other universities).'* He was also very clear and determined as to what kind of job he would like to do and only focused on looking for jobs in those fields. Yijin's aim and interest was in research-related jobs, in which he felt he could make his contribution to society; but he did not plan to do postgraduate study immediately after his graduation.

Shushu

Shushu was 22 and originally from Shanghai. At the time, she was about to graduate, with English language as her major, from a non-elite university. She was applying to study abroad at the time of the interview. She had some information about situations and competition in the labour market in Shanghai, although she did not plan to find a job in Shanghai at that moment.

Like Tangyue, Shushu thought she did not do well in the university entrance exam, which had led her to study in a non-elite university. She '*regretted*' this and considered it '*a pity*'. The original motivation for her to study abroad was to gain a higher degree which might give her extra advantage in seeking jobs; but she changed her opinion and thought that gaining more substantial skills and knowledge from this experience was more important. After being an English major, Shushu thought the English language could not be considered as a subject, but rather as a tool for communication. Although students of English might not be restricted to specific industries in terms of job opportunities (as '*English is needed everywhere*'), their choices would be restricted in terms of the specific work position due to their lack of other 'practical' skills. Hence, Shushu would like to gain some practical skills in her experience of studying in Australia, such as accounting skills.

Heping

Heping, 25 years old, was a PhD student in an elite university. He was from a small city near Shanghai. He studied his first degree in English language in a non-elite university in Shanghai. After this, he was successfully enrolled in an elite university to study international politics and economics for his master's degree. Just before the interview, he had been offered a PhD studentship in another elite university in Shanghai.

Heping had some part-time work experience in two consultancy companies. He felt the business surroundings did not suit him and his preference was still for research-related jobs, which led to his decision to begin a PhD.

Xingqi

Xingqi, originally from Shanghai, was 19 years old and was in his second year in a relatively high-ranking university. His major was in accounting. He had had no work experience so far and had not been to any careers fairs. However, he had a lot of information about his major and had quite clear idea of his career plan. In his opinion, doing a master's degree in accounting would not really help him to get a good job in the field of accounting and business, as accounting jobs required practical skills and experience, which could only be gained from real work rather than academic study. Thus, he planned to find a job after his graduation. As to his degree, he felt quite comfortable and confident, as the university specialized in and was famous for accounting subjects.

5.3.1 Views on the labour market and its competition in Shanghai

The notion of a labour market (*'ren li shi chang'*) is relatively new in the modern Chinese context (Knight and Song, 2005), although this notion is now widely used in China. It is interesting to note that almost all the student and new-graduate interviewees related 'labour market' only and directly to careers fairs when asked about their views and understanding of the concept. This narrower understanding of labour market seems to arise from a comparison with the more familiar 'market place'. It can be argued that students tended to have a more limited social experience than working people, which may restrict their views and understandings about this phenomenon.

-- The perceived characteristics of the labour market and its competition

At the very beginning of the interview, the interviewees were asked about their opinions on the labour market, such as what they understood by a labour market and what the characteristics of the labour market and its competition in Shanghai were. The student interviewees used a range of different adjectives to describe the labour market and its competition, such as 'fierce', 'pressured', 'complicated', 'depressing', 'horrible', 'messy', 'cruel', etc. These younger interviewees widely believed that the labour market was a scene of fierce competition and the situation was becoming worse and worse. Some of them had been to some careers fairs; while others had less direct experience in the labour market and its competition and their information usually came from the media and the university, and from the experience of their friends and family.

Tangyue: *'I have not been to any labour market yet. But I have heard a lot about it. To me, it sounds horrible and terrifying. ... I was told that I need to bring many copies of my CV. I need to be ready, I mean, mentally and psychologically; because those people (employers) may accept your CV, but may not even have a look at it.'*

Xiaomei: *'Those senior students told us that they felt so depressed after coming back from those careers fairs. Too many people compete against each other.'*

Since the early 1980s, there have been so many structural or systemic changes taking place in China: economic reform and development, marketization, higher education expansion, etc. These structural changes and their inevitable influence on the labour market and its competition were identified by the interviewees. These factors were also related to their own opinions on the characteristics of the current labour market. On the one hand, these factors have brought a lot more opportunities into the labour market, both on an individual level and on an industry and company level. For example, it was mentioned by the student interviewees that more people could go to university and improve their personal skills, knowledge and abilities; more job opportunities were created in the market; more types of companies could be chosen from; more space and freedom was allowed for companies' autonomous development; etc. However, on the other hand, a more pessimistic view of 'risk' was expressed. The interviewees were highly aware that risk coexists with opportunities and could not be separated from them or avoided. Interestingly, 'risk' meant 'competition' and 'job seeking' to students, as implied in their statements.

Tangyue: *'Economic development, I think, brings more opportunities. But of course, it also brings about risks and challenges. To me, if a person wants to find a job with little risk but high return, it is absolutely impossible, too rare. Holding this belief to seek jobs, he or she will fail or be eliminated from the competition. So, I still believe that I need to work hard to face and challenge the risk, then will possibly achieve relatively high return.'*

Yijin: *'Things are getting harsher and harsher in the employment market, a limited number of jobs but with more and more graduates.'*

New government policies and social changes were believed to be bringing about this relatively new phenomenon of labour market. More specifically, marketization was identified in the interviews as the most direct contributory factor which had changed people's 'traditional' perception of stable, assured and allocated work. For example, one of the crucial changes in society has been the breaking of 'iron-rice bowl'. The marketized economy was considered to have originated and developed the mechanism of 'competition'. Meanwhile, more autonomous self-development and decision-making were assured and demanded. The student and graduate interviewees naturally compared the situations facing them with that of their parents' generation (more than 20 years earlier).

Yijin: *'(Economic reform and development) brings us more opportunities on the one hand, but also causes much more intensive competition. Under this circumstance, you will not be able to have fixed working hours, like from 9am to 5pm; but instead, you will have endless work load and will have to keep yourself busy.'*

Rather than just defining the competition in terms of looking for jobs, Heping also related it to work practice itself. In order to participate in the competition or secure his position, he identified a changing demand of work itself. Students not only realized the significance of getting a job, but also recognized that competition would extend into one's working life.

In relation to the Shanghai context, most of the interviewees stated their opinions on the locality of Shanghai (in terms of both its geographical location and the relevant governmental policy on its economic development) and its economic boom. They believed that more opportunities had arisen. At the same time, however, the interviewees were also aware and emphasized the competition behind this attractive picture; that is, the increase of competitors for these positions was greater than that of the available opportunities in the labour market. Along with the changing requirements in the labour market, such situations mentioned above brought about uncertainties and risks for individuals. Also, individuals realized that they were standing on their own in the competition, with no one to rely on for information. Thus, people felt it difficult to foresee the result of the competition. The following Shushu's comment suggests it was

also difficult to work out how to engage with the labour market in the first place. There was no formal assistance, such as from a careers' office.

Shushu: *'... I think the current labour market in Shanghai is very messy and a little disordered. Good companies and bad companies are mixed together; so are the levels of skill talents... very messy. Although careers fairs may be announced as being for university graduates or for specific industries, there are still all kinds of and all levels of people attending; similarly with the companies. If you go there on your own, it is so hard to figure out the situation for yourself.'*

-- What is perceived as a good job?

The student and graduate interviewees considered that a good job needed to

- 1) be interesting to them;
- 2) suit their academic backgrounds and personality;
- 3) offer a good working environment; and
- 4) be a white-collar job.

Firstly, interest in the job was identified as one of the most important elements. The students and the new graduates thought that as long as people were interested in their job, they would be enthusiastic about what they did, so that they would make every effort with it.

Xingqi: *'I'd rather find a job which interests me... I think... without enthusiasm, it would be a waste of time and a waste of life to me.'*

Yijin: *'My first degree is in electronic engineering and I am so interested in this field, so I am determined to seek a job related to research in this field. It caters for my interest. It is said that the first job is of the greatest importance. If you step into this field, you may stay in the field and may not get out of it in the rest of your career life. Once I started to look for jobs, I have been determined and knowing what my goals are.'*

Secondly, and related to Yijin's statement, one's professional specialization was of great importance in terms of judging a good job. The student and graduate interviewees

perceived that the job at least should be related to the subjects or majors they studied at university. This point will be further discussed in a later section in comparison with the views of the working people who mentioned that what they studied at university was to some extent irrelevant in terms of seeking jobs, as they needed to learn something new from scratch at work anyway.

Heping: *'You need to see whether you like this job, whether your personality fits into this job, and whether doing this job will make you happy, at least not depressed.'*

Heping further gave an example of his internship experience in one top consultancy company in Shanghai. He found that the atmosphere was too 'business-like' for him and he concluded himself to be best suited to academic work. This was also one of the reasons which led him to start a PhD degree.

The third common element of a good job proposed by the student and graduate interviewees was the working environment. It was clarified that a good environment did not mean a cozy office. Instead, it was associated with organizational culture. Nine interviewees pointed out that a good, healthy working environment was of great importance, and most of them related a good working environment simply to that of foreign or multi-national companies. The interviewees agreed that foreign companies usually put more emphasis on human resource development and management, which was beneficial for both employers and employees. In comparison, some interviewees voiced a totally negative opinion towards state-owned companies, claiming that the stable work or 'iron bowl' concept still existed in relation to state-owned companies. From the interviewees' point of view, the work attitude or spirit in those state-owned companies was lazy and negative. This kind of organizational culture would probably discourage people and damage people's creativity and innovation.

Yijin: *'I will definitely not work for state-owned enterprises, definitely not. I worked in a state-owned company for my placement. To me, the atmosphere there was not good. The work there was too relaxed with no pressure at all, and I do not need to work overtime. Nobody will watch you. I can finish my job quickly, and then surf online for the rest of the day. It is not an active environment, and not good for a newly-graduated*

student or young people. Young people should work hard and make every effort they can, so as to learn something.'

Also, several students mentioned interpersonal relationships at work. They believed that foreign or Sino-foreign companies' organizational culture would lead to healthy interpersonal relationships, without 'intriguing against each other' ('*gou xin dou jiao*').

Xiaomei: *'Actually, I don't have too much thought about what specific type of companies. But I do think the work environment in a foreign or Sino-foreign company is good for us in line with our self-development. First, the interpersonal relationship is simple. People are judged or valued by their work achievement. Second, people can work in different organization cultures, and can learn something advanced. Also, the management and the human resource management in particular would be much more advanced than other types of companies. Those foreign companies offer training opportunities within their organization.'*

This quote also shows an important point that young people are looking for space to develop personally, rather than an easy life. This fits in with the other findings about the desire for continued self-improvement.

Fourth, the student and graduate interviewees pointed out white-collar jobs were respected by others. An image of white-collar working was also depicted; a white-collar staff member would work in busy financial and economic areas, wearing smart working clothes. Gaining social status and respect are considered important aspects of a job.

Xingqi: *'I have not really worked anywhere, but to me, working in those tall buildings and mansions like Plaza 66 [a business center in the Shanghai city centre], wearing suits and ties... that gives you a special appearance, showing your quality. People can tell that you are white-collar by looking at your clothes. That is cool.'*

Heping: *'Traditionally, those white-collar jobs are good jobs for us, wearing suits and usually dealing with finance and consultant jobs. Those are the elite jobs. The white-collars are also respected or admired by others. ... But everyone has their own job. Everyone can achieve from his own job.'*

Salary and welfare factors would not be among their first consideration as they believed that greater work experience and their contributions at work would lead to these being increased accordingly. Due to their lack of work experience and as a result of higher education expansion from which more and more university graduates were emerging to compete with those with work experiences in the labour market, the student and graduate interviewees recognized that they stood in a relatively weaker position in the labour market competition. Thus, they found that they had little negotiating power with their employers in terms of salary and welfare.

5.3.2 The perceived selection criteria for employment

Initially, the interviewees talked about how they planned to find a good or satisfactory job. Interestingly, all of them mentioned that they needed to have a clear goal and idea of what they would like to do. They needed to find out the requirements of the labour market, in particular those of the industries and the companies in which their interests lay. Following this, they also needed to recognize correctly their position or standing in the competition. Personal career development needed to be designed according to the combined evaluation of the market need and their social position.

Xiaomei: 'To succeed means we have to set up certain goals and targets. It can be a general goal, but it will be better if we also have some short-term targets. ... as changes take place everywhere and at all times, we may change our goal as well... we can not estimate ourselves too highly and have to have a correct self-evaluation of who we are... there are a lot of job opportunities in the labour market, but opportunities are for those who are well prepared. At least, we can prepare something. For example, I can have a look at the general requirements of those jobs interesting to me. What do they ask for? For instance, like English language skills, computing skills and interpersonal skills. We can prepare to search information like these, if not fully. And we can try to train ourselves according to these requirements.'

This view can be classed as an expression of what Brown and Hesketh (2004) called strategies of 'players'. Students were highly conscious of their self-identity when they came to constructing and managing their employability. They would choose to improve their skills and knowledge according to the market demands.

However, Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue that the ‘ideal types’ of competitors in the labour market, namely ‘players’ and ‘purists’, do not neatly mirror empirical realities. It is hardly possible to group individuals into either type; rather their comments may place them somewhere in the middle. This is proved to be true in this research. While the student interviewees found it significant to build their employability and compete in a ‘player’ way, they agreed that real abilities and skills were of the utmost importance. Apart from the factors and criteria for selection in employment identified in the questionnaires, the student and graduate interviewees emphasized another factor: personal skills. The interviewees agreed that the different factors, such as education qualifications and work experience, had influence on their employment. These different factors could be seen as components of a ‘personal capital’ package (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). However, the students and graduates all maintained that as long as a person had ‘real’ skills and abilities, he or she would succeed eventually.

Yijin: *‘The competition is very fierce, but there are lots of good job positions or opportunities. As long as you have real skills or abilities, you should not and will not feel too much pressure.’*

No matter how uncertain the society and the labour market becomes, no matter how many changes were taking place, the foremost concern to these interviewees was to ensure their skills and abilities were improved and updated, to assist them to occupy a solid position in the competition. So what do the interviewees perceive to be appropriate skills and abilities? This will be discussed in the following sections.

5.3.3 Skills and abilities – a decisive factor for success

A person’s skills and abilities were considered to play the most important and an essential role in personal success in the labour market, according to the student and graduate interviewees. They believed that these personal skills were intrinsic assets of the holders, and could not be stolen, removed or affected by other external influences.

Yijin: *‘It is of the greatest importance to master substantial skills and knowledge. These are the things people can not borrow or take away from you. It is our assets and will last permanently.’*

The interviewees also agreed that these skills and abilities might need to be reinforced and updated, so as to maintain and increase their value, both for personal development and for staying ahead in a competitive labour market. This could be considered as one of the tasks of lifelong learning.

Shushu: *'Through lifelong learning, we shall reinforce and modify our skills and abilities as a whole. We will think and rethink our work and study, so as to improve the quality and efficiency of it.'*

Heping: *'We will not and can not achieve all skills in one go. Everyone will have their advantages and disadvantages. Lifelong learning is a great opportunity for us to achieve more and improve ourselves, both knowledge-wise and experience-wise.'*
(Heping)

Xingqi: *'Skills and abilities are decisive. No matter how much the qualification value changes due to higher education expansion, people who have skills will succeed and will have their advantages. ...We need to continuously improve and develop our skills, not only when we are in school or at university, but also when we start our career life in the society. ... Lifelong learning to some extent is for self-training of skills.'*

It is interesting to note that Xingqi separated skills from qualifications. While qualification could be seen as a positional good, the interviewee did not consider skills as a positional good. In fact, this view was commonly raised by the student and graduate interviewees, that personal skills and abilities could not be simply certified by qualifications. Qualifications only represented the experience of study; while personal skills were intrinsic and needed time to be shown and proven. It was perceived to be unfair to judge a person's ability only through their formal credentials.

Yijin: *'Nobody can tell I have communication skills by looking at my bachelor degree or other certificates. It takes a while before the skills are shown.'*

But, what did the student and graduate interviewees actually mean by skills and abilities? What were the identified skills and abilities? Three main categories can be identified

from the interviewees' comments: professional skills and knowledge, interpersonal skills, and ethics and morality.

-- Professional skills and knowledge

Professional skills and knowledge were considered as one of the sets of skills people must have. Almost all the student and graduate interviewees thought that professional skills and knowledge were the basic skills for personal achievement at work or study. Only with profound professional skills and knowledge could one embark on working in specific fields.

Heping: *'Currently, I am a student. Also, I think my future job is also research-related. So to me, skills mean mainly academic skills. Specifically, those skills are knowledge in specific fields, expressive ability, logical thinking, language skills...Maybe people in a different field or business industry need different skills.'*

Yijin: *'I think the most important skill is your professional knowledge and skills. Without good professional knowledge, you won't have any achievement.'*

Xingqi: *'In my opinion, the most important element is your professional skills and knowledge. Without those professional skills and knowledge, one would not have 'capital' to do work. Without those basic skills as protection, one would not achieve good performance at work, even though he or she is good at other aspects.'*

Besides academic knowledge, the ability to learn was proposed to be of great importance. It did not simply mean to remember what the books say; rather, it was the ability *'to apply theories into practice'*. A distinction was made between theory and practice. The three student interviewees also emphasized the ability for self-learning.

Yijin: *'70-80% of education should be self-learning. To me, education is not merely to be taught or to follow teachers. What teachers do is to instruct and guide us to a certain direction. And after that, we need to learn by ourselves. No one will always guide or teach you.'*

In addition, the student and graduate interviewees found English language and computing skills were of great importance, as ‘all the job advertisements mention them’ regardless of the types of companies. In particular, as it was perceived by the students that ‘good jobs are all in foreign companies’, English became seen as a basic skill for employment.

Yijin: *‘Communication depends on language. Language skills are very important. English is particularly important. It will be so difficult if one person cannot speak good English. Currently, good jobs are almost all in those Sino-foreign companies. If one’s English is not good, it is difficult to get a job in those companies. Like for me, all three-round job interviews were conducted in English. So even if we are science students, we must learn English.’*

-- Soft skills

The student and graduate interviewees were highly aware of the requirement for interpersonal soft skills at work; emphasis was put on teamwork, communication skills and problem-solving skills. Although few of the students and graduate students had full-time work experience yet, they tried to explain why soft skills were important.

Xingqi: *‘To me, one of the most important skills is team spirit and communication skills. Currently, work or work targets can no longer be achieved only by an individual’s effort, but a whole group’s effort. A group’s strength can never be compared to any individual’s. So, to fully develop a group’s strength, communication within the group is indispensable. This requires us to master communication skills, and requires us to understand and realize the importance of team spirit.’*

Again, the students mentioned that these soft skills were asked for in job advertisements more often than not, which indicated the importance of having these skills.

-- Hard-working

The student interviewees believed that the strong desire for study and work and being hard-working were also critical elements to personal skills and abilities and to personal success in the labour market, no matter how society was changing. This belief could be

seen partly as a reflection of traditional Chinese culture. For example, hard work would lead people to success.

Tangyue: *'There are lots of fearful things in our life, in our study and in our future jobs, but I am sure that as long as I am hard-working enough, I will succeed and will not be any worse than others.'*

'Hard-working' as a secured strategy was deeply rooted in people's minds, regardless of what changes take place in the world of work, in terms of the changing skill demands.

-- 'Xin tai (heart attitude)'

Emotional quality (EQ) was also mentioned in the interviews with the students and graduate students. The student and graduate interviewees referred to 'xin tai' as self-adjustment or psychological quality. As first-time competitors in the labour market, the students and graduate students were aware of their relatively weaker position in the competition in general. This was mainly due to their 'lack of work experience', according to the interview statements. Hence, they realized that success in the competition, or rather seeking jobs, would not come easily to those first-time competitors. Failures might frustrate them. Under this circumstance, the student and graduate interviewees proposed that, in addition to skills and abilities, one needed to be fully prepared for dealing with failures and frustrations.

Tangyue: *'In general, when you go to those employment fairs, you need to bring as many CVs as possible. You cannot expect too much. If the people receive your CV, that is already good. More often than not, they will not even glance at it. So at that time, you need to adjust yourself and tell yourself 'don't give up'.'*

Some of the graduate interviewees identified themselves as occupying a disadvantaged position in the competition in graduating from non-elite universities. On the one hand, they believed that real skills and abilities mattered in employment; however, they also tried to prepare themselves or to expect certain unpleasant occasions.

Xiaomei: *'Students from non-elite universities tend to be offered fewer opportunities in employment competition. For myself, I told myself not to give up easily, but need to be*

aware the fact that I might be rejected in the first place if students from Fudan or JiaoTong Universities are in the same race.'

Also, as new entrants to the labour market competition or at work, students might be confronted with numerous new situations, which might not be mentioned in books or at school. Rather than panicking, one needed to learn how to deal with these situations.

Shushu: *'I think psychological quality is the most important. As long as you can adjust yourself well and can get yourself adapted to new situations well, difficulties will be solved sooner or later.'*

To sum up, a skills package includes multiple factors: professional skills and knowledge, soft skills, a capacity for hard work and good emotional qualities. A mixed view of competition strategies was shown throughout the interviews with the students and graduate students. On the one hand, they firmly believed that skills, knowledge and abilities were the substantial elements for success in the labour market. On the other hand, they were also looking for positional goods to compete against each other, as emphasis was put on 'speciality' or 'better skills (than others)', so as to stand out from a group of competitors. Also, meanwhile, the students were highly aware of external information despite their relative lack of direct experience in the labour market competition. The external information included that obtained from television, other media and their friends. With this information, they would try to figure out and understanding what the market needed, and accordingly either fit themselves into the 'technical puzzle' or assess their position in the competition and assess the tactics or strategies to adopt.

5.3.4 Educational capital

The student and graduate interviewees considered educational qualifications as another significant factor influencing one's position in the labour market competition. The competition for credentials was perceived to occur at two levels, inter-qualification and intra-qualification competition. By inter-qualification competition, the interviewees referred to the competition among different degree levels, such as high school, college, bachelor, master or PhD level; and intra-qualification competition involved the competition between elite university degrees and non-elite university degrees.

All of the students and graduate students agreed that the educational qualifications held by a person played a significant role in this person's journey through employment competition. Educational qualifications were perceived to be particularly important for new entrants into the labour market. In particular, the student and graduate interviewees compared degrees in general to their holders' *'qiao men zhuan'*. This literally means 'knocking door brick': educational degrees in general were thought to serve as a 'brick' to knock down the door to the labour market competition. Only with the degree would a person be qualified for the competition, with the degree serving as a status marker to impress potential employers. However, Yijin did not forget to emphasize the importance of personal skills and abilities as a substantial element for a person's employability.

Yijin: *'I think ... educational degrees are extremely important in the first-time employment. First, degrees are like 'qiao men zhuan'. If you do not have it, you will not be able to get into any companies at all. ... However, even if you have a degree, you still need your own skills and abilities.'*

Xingqi: *'If two people compete for the same position, one has a degree and the other does not; and even if those two do have similar ability; it is for sure that the one with a degree will be much more advantaged.'*

-- At least a bachelor degree: inter-qualification competition

While talking about the importance of the degree in general, there was a common sense among the interviewees that a university degree was the basic requirement in the current labour market competition. This argument was related to the situation of higher education expansion and credential inflation. As the interviewees expressed it, 'too many' people obtained a university degree, which led to a situation of 'degree floods'.

Inter-qualification competition among different levels of credentials was less mentioned by the student and graduate interviewees. They did not deny the value of a higher degree; but only two students expressed their opinions on pursuing a postgraduate degree.

As higher education expansion first took place at the undergraduate level, it has strongly affected the value of a bachelor degree in general in China and the undergraduate employment market. Later, with the expansion being extended to the postgraduate level, this not only served the national demand for higher skills and could temporarily alleviate the unemployment of graduates, but also catered for individuals' desire to pursue a more 'valuable' degree, since their current degrees were losing their value. But the interesting point is that two interviewees clearly showed their unwillingness to pursue a postgraduate degree under this situation.

(Interviewer: Since the higher education expansion, do you think the value of a degree has changed?) Yijin: *'Yes, definitely. There are more and more graduates and postgraduates. I did not want to apply to a postgraduate course, just because of this. Too many postgraduate students... In my university, there were 3000 undergraduate students in my year. You see, they even enrolled twice as many postgraduates as undergraduates this year. To be a postgraduate, you need to attend some lectures in the first year, and then do some projects with your supervisors. There are more and more students, but the number of supervisors does not change... I feel terrible about this.'*

Xingqi: *'To apply for postgraduate study is really hot and popular in our university, because everyone has a bachelor degree, plus the higher education has been expanded even more than before and it is very hard to find a job after graduation. But from my point of view, it takes three years to finish a postgraduate study, which is more research-based and more theoretical studies. If I work for three years instead of studying, I will have advantages of more practical knowledge. Working experience and practical knowledge accumulated at work is more important, especially in accounting. ... You can not always deal with some cases by studying theories. ... To some extent, I do not think a just-graduated master student will have stronger practical or operational skill than an undergraduate who has worked for three years.'*

These two interviewees were both clear about their expectations and motivations for postgraduate study. The view of Xingqi's, a year-two university student, reflected both human capital and positional competition perspectives. He was highly aware of the situation of credential inflation. Also, based on his knowledge on the accounting field, he took opportunity cost into consideration: these opportunity costs included working

experience or study leading to a degree, but whether this degree would increase his own employability or decrease in labour market value were both still in doubt. Analyzing this from a rational choice perspective, it can be argued that while to study a postgraduate course would lead you to a situation of uncertain degree value and relatively poor teaching and learning resources, working experience was relatively certain to bring a positive return. Such comparative evaluations of working experience and educational degrees will be analyzed further in the next section.

-- Elite university degrees vs. non-elite university degrees

Institutional hierarchies were perceived to play an important role in deciding the value of a degree in the labour market. All the student and graduate interviewees agreed that different status levels of institutions made a difference in the credential competition. In this respect, the interviewees primarily distinguished between elite and non-elite universities, which is an officially recognized system in Chinese higher education¹⁵.

The perceptions of the advantage of obtaining an elite university degree were deeply rooted in people's minds, as a structural factor, which serves as part of the framework against which individuals may judge their position in the labour market competition.

Heping: *'If I am asked to speak to those students in the beginning stage of their university studies, I will encourage them to study hard and wish them the best of luck in study. However, in reality, different level institutions do have differences between each other. Everyone has their preference for elite universities. It does not necessarily mean that elite universities must be better, but if you can not knock down this barrier, you will just lack something...'*

A tension can be seen within Heping. As one obtaining his first degree from a non-elite university and currently studying in an elite university for his PhD study, he felt it might be more important for an individual to work hard and be responsible for their learning. However, in the real labour market, he perceived that an elite university degree could act as a structural force which could not be knocked down easily by an individual's efforts. But the other interviewees maintained that, no matter which university one was

¹⁵ Elite/top universities include those universities taking part in the 211 Project; while the other universities are so-called non-elite/non-top universities.

from, one should not lose confidence and should keep on working hard. Such an attitude seemed to play an important role in supporting individuals' employability building.

Yijin: *'Even though you do not graduate from an elite university, you should still work hard and have an active attitude to take part in the competition.'*

Moreover, among the elite universities, the interviewees seemed to stratify those universities into two further levels: 'elite' universities and 'other top' universities. In their opinion, graduates from the elite universities, such as Peking University, Tsing Hua University, Fu Dan University and Jiao Tong University, would have even more advantages due to their 'branded' degrees. Some interviewees argued however that once past the first selection by employers, everyone could stand a chance in the job interviews, no matter which university they were from.

Tangyue: *'I think there are indeed differences between those elite universities' degrees and those of non-elite universities. ... You may not feel this way if you come from an elite university, while you will be deeply influenced or feel this difference if you graduate from a middle level university. ... When we seek jobs, things are a little bit different. Except for those elite universities, like Peking, Tsing Hua, Fu Dan and Jiao Tong, I have found competitors from the other top-universities seem to stand at a similar level to me; maybe only a little, just a little higher. There is no such clear difference. ... I did lots of psychological preparation and did not expect too much from those job interviews, because I consider those people from elite universities as my competitors.'*

Tangyue, a non-elite university graduate, identified herself as being in a relatively disadvantaged position in the labour market competition compared with her counterparts from elite universities. She believed that there are differences between top and non-elite university degrees. Later on, from her experience in the labour market competition, she started to understand the situation as one in which only elite university graduates would stand ahead in this hierarchical credential competition and the rest were in a relatively similar position to each other.

As to the reasons for these differences the student interviewees, especially those from elite universities, mainly related these to the teaching and learning and the quality of education. There is a perception that an elite university would provide top grade teaching resources and teaching quality, which can be understood as a form of ‘cultural capital’.

From their experience or their folk knowledge of the labour market, the interviewees perceived and found that people with elite university degrees had more advantages and stood higher in the competition. The interviewees argued that employers would prefer degrees and qualifications from those elite universities, and accordingly they would give those graduates more opportunities. In this sense, there were two different career routes or paths available for students from elite and non-elite universities. This again reinforced their comparative positions in the competition. The following quote was from the interview with a newly graduated student from an elite university.

Yijin: *‘To me, the competition is only among my schoolmates. The careers fairs we [students from this elite university A] have attended are all held in our university. One of the reasons is that we are [University A]. [University A] always has those companies coming to our campus and organizing those campus careers fairs. Therefore, there are plenty of opportunities for us and we are more advantaged. But those from non-elite universities have relatively fewer chances and have to go to those careers fairs held for the whole society or community. ... So in this aspect, I am greatly advantaged. In the peak time of university graduates recruitment, there are companies coming to my university every day...’*

This interviewee was very confident about the fact that attending an elite university brought him lots of opportunities. Moreover, the competition he was in was only open to competitors from his own university. Compared to this, those non-elite university students had insufficient career information and opportunities, and ended up in a competition that was open to a wider section in the society, increasing the range of their competitors. Since students from non-elite universities were unable to get into the careers fairs in elite universities, they had to go to other careers fairs open to everyone, including their peers and others. This could increase their uncertainty and risk of not

obtaining employment and thus worsen their already weaker position in the labour market.

Heping, the PhD student from an elite university, also talked about his career development: *'Elite universities like Fudan have lots of opportunities for academic exchange programmes with some world-class universities abroad.'* To him, such opportunities could offer him chances to improve his professional knowledge from different perspectives, as foreign universities might have a different academic culture. In saying this, however, Heping did not necessarily infer that universities abroad were better than Chinese universities.

During the interviews, there were two common metaphors which were used when describing a degree. First, a degree was compared to 'a marked brand' (*ming pai xiao ying*). In other words, the degree was marked by and engrained with a certain status derived from the public reputation of the issuing institution. Second, a degree was also similarly thought to produce a 'halo effect': an individual is evaluated highly on many traits because of a belief that the individual rates highly on one trait (Thorndike, 1920). It would be taken for granted that an elite university degree holder has higher level skills and is capable of performing better than others, since the university they graduated from was better than others. In contrast, a person would be considered normal or at least not special if he graduated from a non-elite university. Using the term 'the halo effect', emphasized again that an elite university degree opened up wider opportunities to its holder. But the interviewees pointed out that the halo effect might also bring some potential drawbacks; that is, whether this view of educational degrees was too generalized or too taken-for-granted, because a degree did not denote everything. In the following quotation, Xiaomei illustrates a clear awareness of the use of qualifications by employers as a screening device. This might influence their attitudes toward qualifications.

Xiaomei: *'I think there are differences between elite and non-elite universities. I think in this way: when companies receive applicants' applications, there must be piles and piles. To the employers, they will not know the applicants in person. Where they can search for information is from the degree levels and the institutional level of the degrees. It is because from people's general view, elite university graduates will have better*

qualities and skills. They think there is a gap between those [different competitors]. ... But it is impossible to judge a person's knowledge and working skills by looking at that piece of paper. ... If you want to know someone very well, you need to have contact with him and you need to talk and work with him to observe. ... But before that, it is really hard [to tell from their qualifications]. So they will consider those elite university graduates more.'

Note that this interviewee believed that a difference exists between elite and non-elite university degree holders in terms of employers' preferences, but she also showed her doubt that an elite university graduate must be better. From her point of view, an elite university degree did not necessarily reveal the whole 'truth' about the holder in terms of their real skills and knowledge level. The practice of employers giving more chances to elite university degree holders made non-elite university graduates feel helpless.

Furthermore, a majority of the interviewees believed that studying in an elite university and holding an elite university degree also had a psychological effect on the holders; they would be more confident about themselves. However, almost all the non-elite university interviewees expressed their frustration and depression that they failed in the university entrance exam to enter an elite university.

Tangyue: *'As to my personality, I have an unforgettable experience. I did not do a good job in the entrance exam, and I was absolutely depressed in the first two years in the university. I was too down to do anything. Not until the third year, did I realize that I could not be like this any more. I changed myself after that, being more active in study and working very hard. You may not feel in this way if you come from an elite university, while you will be deeply influenced or feel this difference if you graduate from a middle level university.'*

At an individual level, degrees could have a psychological effect on the holder's confidence; however, it was more important how individuals could adjust themselves and make up for it. Through the above account, it could be felt that there was a strong wish to change the situation of being in a non-elite university. Tangyue had experienced accepting, struggling, self-adjustment and change. She considered working hard as the way to make up for the disadvantage of being in a second-rate university. Again, the

strong belief in ‘hard work’ played a role of panacea to support and encourage individuals in developing their employability, particularly in making up other deficits or disadvantages they might have. In addition, Tangyue’s quote shows the necessity of being self-responsible in the fierce employment competition, and this self-responsibility also indicates the possibility of doing something about one’s own life. In other words, an individual’s life is not totally structurally determined and agency holds out the hope.

Both the elite and non-elite university students and graduates were aware of their relative positions in the credential competition. Also, not only did they naturally fit their situation into the institution hierarchies, but also the interviewees showed their desires and their attempts to improve or to secure their position, by ‘working hard’, ‘skill improvement and development’ and ‘self-adjustment’. In spite of the fact that different credentials would have different psychological effect on the holders, the interviewees still thought personal ability, skills and knowledge would play the most important role in the competition. No matter which university a person was from, his or her skills and knowledge would always play the most vital role in their success. Also, we could argue here that all of this notion that the key to one’s success lies in one’s own efforts could be seen as a contrast with some of the ‘collectivist’ views of Chinese culture, but supported the point that one must take responsibility for their own success in the labour market.

5.3.5 Work experience

Work experience was considered by the students and the graduate students as another essential factor in personal success in the labour market. As an educational degree helped one to get into the competition, a certain amount of work experience would reinforce the one’s standing.

The student interviewees perceived the experience of working in a specific job could provide chances for further professional development. It was believed that people would confront practical problems, difficulties and mistakes at work. Through a certain level of academic degree or university study experience, people could master and achieve relevant theories, but might not have come across all the difficulties and problems in real work. The student and graduate interviewees related this point to the theory-laden teaching in Chinese education.

Also, the interviewees emphasized that some fields of work required practical experience rather than deep theoretical knowledge.

Xingqi: *'Let me give you an example. There are two competitors: one with a bachelor degree and three years' working experience and the other with three years' master study experience. I think the former one has more advantage, because, maybe due to the different subject like accounting, it requires a great amount of practice, which is absolutely important. Some problems at work can not be solved by reading theories. Only confronting in real life, can we know and understand what to do and how to deal with it. ... From those theoretical studies, the only thing we can obtain is abstract concepts.'*

Work experience was perceived as enabling people to 'grow up' more in terms of professional skills and knowledge and to know how to deal with real problems. With more work experience, personal abilities were expected to be promoted too. In this sense, to employ those with relatively rich work experience could decrease internal training costs.

Xiaomei: *'It takes time and money to train a new graduate, no matter how good and capable he or she is; because people need time to adjust themselves into the new environment, both with respect to the professional skills and his or her own psychological preparation.'*

Xingqi: *'To a company, it needs to invest its time and money on training new employees, to help them to adapt to the new working environment. If there is someone who already has working experience, the company can save the time and put him directly into the work, because he knows the process and methods [to deal with the work].'*

Apart from professional skills, the interviewees also related work experience to the improvement of interpersonal skills. According to them, work experience offered chances to communicate with different people, in which communication skills would be promoted. Confronting different problems and difficulties, a person's problem solving skills would be improved, which could also develop their EQ (*xin tai*). The more

difficulties and problems a person experienced, the more confident he or she could be in future work. Thus, different work experience could show people's capability at work.

Tangyue: *'Working experience does not only mean professional skills and abilities. To me, it means more or emphasizes more on people's abilities, like communication, flexibility, presentation skills, and so on.'*

The student and graduate interviewees noticed the requirement for work experience from job advertisements and careers fairs. However, they thought this requirement was not fair on them. As a new graduate it seems impossible to obtain any work experience, which in turn put them in a weaker position compared to experienced competitors.

Tangyue: *'I do realize this. Working experience is vital. It is a pity for me not having much.'*

The interviewees were highly aware of the importance of the first job, especially with regard to graduate employment. *'To get a job first, and then choose a job'* (Yijin); by saying this, the interviewees did not mean the first employment was not important. On the contrary, to the interviewees, the first employment was vital. They maintained that, as a new graduate, it was inevitable that they would lose some opportunities owing to the requirement for work experience. Moreover, gaining employment was full of fierce competition; it was wise to get a job first, rather than being unemployed. During the first job, students could develop all sorts of abilities and skills, get to know what they are looking for in their career path, and get fully ready for the next employment where they could choose a job which is more suitable.

Xiaomei: *'I would say I will not expect a lot in my first employment. I will find a job first, and then improve myself and accumulate lots of experience. ... also get to know this industry or field better.'*

Yijin: *'It is really important to get into the first job. Once getting into this field, it is not difficult to change a job in the future. ... You need to find a job which interests you. In this case, you can devote yourself to it and make every effort. The first job is really important.'*

These two interviewees identified their social standing in the labour market context. They also understood and obtained knowledge on which strategies to use and how to improve their situations. Yijin graduated from an elite university. As mentioned earlier, he did realize he possessed an advantaged position over others in terms of educational capital. Meanwhile, he also realized his disadvantage with regard to work experience. It can be argued that individuals were well aware of their relative standing in the labour market. They had the abilities to analyze their own situations, and reflect on and seek solutions for them.

5.3.6 Family background and *guanxi* capital

The interviewees were asked questions about the role of the family for competitors in the labour market. Two aspects of ‘family background’ appeared in the student and graduate interviewees’ responses. First, ‘family background’ referred to a family’s socio-economic status, that is, whether the parents were professionals, intellectuals, etc. Their understanding of this aspect was similar to Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural capital’. Second, ‘family background’ was related to *guanxi* or social connections, which could be related to, but is not exactly equivalent to, the Western concept of ‘social capital’ as it is manifested in western countries (Huang, 2003; Shi, 2008; see also section 2.5.4 above). In this research, when the interviewees talked about their experience in and perceptions of the labour market, they were concerned entirely with their own personal achievements and benefits. In this case, the notion of *guanxi* capital concept will be adopted as being the more appropriate here. Both cultural capital and *guanxi* capital seemed to work together in terms of generating personal benefits in the Chinese society.

When ‘family background’ referred to cultural capital, the interviewees considered it relatively positively. Professional parents were perceived as instructors or advisors in their children’s career development. According to the interviewees, such parents would be well informed of the current situation of their field; would know where to start for a new entrant; and accordingly, would be able to give sufficient suggestions and instruction. Under this circumstance, the role of family background was thought of positively, particularly by those who benefitted from it.

Yijin: *'I mean family background. ... I mean the family is intellectuals, which is more important. I do not mean the family are party leaders or government officials. ... There are lots of top students in Jiao Tong University, whose parents are professors and researchers. ... [Later on, the interviewee was asked what advantages he thought he had.] I am so interested in research in the electronics field. I think I am good at it. My father does similar work in the same field, and he has given me so much instruction and help.'*

This interviewee clarified the notion of 'family background' as cultural capital, from which he benefited.

More often, 'family background' was considered as *guanxi* capital and social connection. Interviewees all agreed that it was important to utilize interpersonal resource, trust and relations to achieve private benefit, since China was still a society where the complex social relationships of *guanxi* are central to its functioning in many respects, such as seeking good employment. The possession of *guanxi* capital was considered as being quite distinct from one's knowledge and skills. In this sense, the more *guanxi* a personal had, the more possibilities there were to succeed.

Heping: *'Among a group of competitors with similar abilities and skills, if some of them can use a few personal relationships to open the door a little wider, they can yield twice the result or success with half the effort.'*

Shushu: *'Under a fierce competition, those with a wider 'back door' can save the energy of working hard. They do not have to make every effort. The 'back door' can help and push them forward.'*

The term 'back door' in Chinese was euphemism for social relationships and *guanxi*, but in a negative way, especially by the younger interviewees. It implied that a person might not be able to succeed or do something with his own effort. In that case, he or she had to find another way to gain access or meet the target. Similarly, the role of *guanxi* capital in facilitating personal success was considered negatively. Despite holding a negative view on the role of social connection in employment, the interviewees could not deny its existence in the Chinese context.

Yijin: *'I despise those who make use of personal relationships to help their children to seek jobs. I despise them. ... [Later on, the interviewee was asked whether this phenomenon exists] Of course, it happens all the time, too many examples.'*

The student interviewees on the one hand perceived the role of *guanxi* capital in the labour market competition in a negative way; however, on the other hand, they kept on persuading themselves that it was the individual and the skills and knowledge held by individuals that mattered in the competition. It is interesting to compare these views to those of the working interviewees and the policy-maker interviewees. Rather than perceiving the role of *guanxi* capital negatively, the working interviewees talked about it in a tone of helpless acceptance and resignation; and the policy-maker interviewees utilized interpersonal connections as a way to obtain information about the specific applicant (see section 5.4.7, p164 and section 5.5.6, p179).

Xingqi: *'Whether a person has social connection or not, as long as he has skills and abilities, he does not need to be frightened.'*

Tangyue: *'In my opinion, family background plays an important role in a person's success. But still, we need to depend on ourselves more. I have a friend who is from a peasant family. But now she has been enrolled in Shanghai Foreign Studies University and she always tries her best to improve all sorts of skills. I believe she will have a huge success in the future. Thus, people need to work hard and depend on themselves. This is more important.'*

This interviewee was deeply influenced by her friend's experience. On the one hand, she agreed on the importance of family background. However, she also believed that working hard would help people to succeed, and individuals needed to be more responsible for their self-development. The existence of a single example of one person's success against the odds through her own effort is enough to reinforce the 'ideology' of personal effort bringing success, despite a knowledge that the 'norm' might be very different.

5.3.7 Locality: Shanghai residents vs. non-Shanghai residents

In the questionnaire, the respondents ranked ‘having a Shanghai citizen identification’ as the second least important factor in competition in the Shanghai labour market; and most of the respondents (89.2%) agreed that Shanghai citizens were facing more and more challenges and competition from people from other parts of the country. These views were confirmed in the interviews, although distinctions were made between different types of employers. The student and graduate interviewees commonly believed that companies other than state-owned enterprises, such as foreign, Sino-foreign and private Chinese companies, did not care about the Shanghai *hukou* as an employment requirement, judging from the information in job advertisements.

Nevertheless, the interviewees commonly expressed the view that to have a Shanghai *hukou* is still quite important in the labour market. One of the reasons was linked to higher education expansion. After the higher education expansion, more and more bachelor degree holders competed in the labour market. As new graduates with no work experience, a Shanghai *hukou* could possibly play a membership role to protect and secure the position of Shanghai resident graduates to some extent. But again, the interviewees pointed out that this membership protection seemed only to work at an undergraduate level. Postgraduate non-Shanghai residents still had a chance to compete and even succeed in the competition.

Yijin: *‘My friends who are not originally from Shanghai... I find if they are undergraduate students, it is very difficult for them to find a job in Shanghai. But there is a new policy this year. The policy privileges those postgraduate students who are not originally from Shanghai.’*

Here a complex employment calculation or equation appeared. Work experience and a higher education degree were perceived to have a positive value. This value was also considered greater than the negative value of not having a Shanghai *hukou*.

In response to the higher education expansion and graduate employment situation, the Shanghai government issued a policy on non-Shanghai graduates: by the end of May each year, if non-Shanghai graduates could not find a job in Shanghai, their *hukou*

would be automatically transferred back to their hometown. This policy could and did have a psychological impact on students.

Shushu: '[Under this policy] *Shanghai students can take their time to seek jobs. They can think and pick. They can try everywhere, even if they fail sometimes. But that is a totally different story to a non-Shanghai graduate, I mean, psychologically. They have a time limit. If they want to stay in Shanghai, they have to be quick. Even if they find a job, the job is not so good, at least to me, the job is not good at all, and with very low salary. They do not have the certainty of staying. But again, this kind of topic depends on individuals' attitudes. Shanghai is not that beautiful to everyone.*'

5.3.8 An initial discussion on the student and graduate interviewees' views on the labour market competition

The above analysis focuses on the student and graduate interviewees' views and perceptions of the labour market competition in Shanghai. To sum up, the student and graduate interviewees widely expressed their fears and confusions about this competition. They also admitted that they had little direct or rich experience of competing and seeking jobs in the labour market. From their statements, multiple factors were perceived to work together in deciding one's employability and standing in the competition; for example, educational capital, work experience, social networks, and geographical origins. The interviewees revealed their views on these 'hard currencies': educational qualifications and work experience were considered as the two essential factors. The student interviewees emphasized and reflected on the role of educational qualifications as a screening device to select competitors. A qualification worked as a ticket to enter into the gate of the labour market, while it was perceived to be inadequate to ensure their winning position in the competition, as it was argued that educational qualifications did not really tell the employers what kind of knowledge and skills the person has. Work experience operated as another indispensable criterion in selection. In contrast to the views on qualifications, the student interviewees saw work experience as a resource or medium to improve their skills and knowledge, or rather, as a way to promote their productivity. In relation to this, the interviewees repeatedly emphasized that an individual's innate skills, knowledge and abilities mattered most in the labour market competition, no matter where, when and against whom a person was competing. One secure strategy to construct one's employability would be working hard to improve

one's innate skills and knowledge. It is interesting to see that the interviewees' accounts also revealed their thinking and strategies to gain positional advantages, in addition to developing their skills and abilities. They tried to make themselves stand out by all sorts of means. Some of them emphasized factors such as their possession of an elite university degree or the required social skills. In line with Brown and Hesketh's framework (2004), mixed strategies of 'purists and players' have been used by the interviewees to manage their employability.

The only direct experience of competing in the labour market the students had was of careers fairs. Nevertheless, they seemed to be highly aware of the changes in the workplace and what sorts of knowledge and skills were required in the labour market. Where did this information and knowledge come from? Individual students gained their information from media, from their friends and occasionally from their families. In particular, they relied on job advertisements and the information from the careers fairs. Job advertisements were considered as a way of telling the competitors what the employers were asking for. By comparing and summarizing from different advertisements, the students have figured out what they believe were the skills and knowledge demanded. To supplement this, the students also consulted with their peer or senior students who already had some experience in the labour market.

Family sources were less mentioned in relation to gaining job-related information. Only one student interviewee, Yijin, talked about that his father who was in the same field of work, giving him some useful information and advice in terms of seeking jobs and career development. The parents of current university students largely experienced the system of job allocation on first entering work, but they also were the first to experience the impact of social reforms that undermined job security. They themselves can therefore be argued to be the first to experience a labour market in the newly marketized economy, which might limit their experience of a labour market and accordingly suggestions to their children on how to engage with it. In this case, the students and graduates were to some extent left on their own in the competition. It is noteworthy that although families may not have been a key source for information, the interviewees did suggest that family could help in other ways, notably through *guanxi*.

When talking about their potential competitors, the students and the graduates limited the scope to other students and graduates. They recognized their disadvantage of not having work experience, which constrained their opportunities in employment. Identifying the demanded skills and knowledge, the students and the graduates also had a clear self-image with regards to where they stood in the labour market. Drawing on their information on the selection criteria in the labour market, they fitted themselves into the ladder and took actions or chose tactics and strategies to compete.

5.4 The perceptions of the working interviewees

This section will present the perceptions of the working interviewees on the Shanghai labour market competition. To begin with, the personal background of the six working interviewees will be briefly introduced.

Liyang

Liyang, 26 years old, was originally from Shanghai. After graduating from a college, she has been working in a private Chinese trading company for nearly seven years. She was attending an adult education-degree programme (in addition to STTP). Due to the unpleasant work environment and the complicated interpersonal relationships at work, Liyang was thinking about changing her job. But the lack of a university degree became the biggest handicap for her.

Hanfei

Hanfei, 29 years old, was originally from Shanghai. Graduating from a non-elite university, she has been working for three years, and changed jobs twice. At this time, she was working as a project manager in a foreign exhibition company. The company could be considered as a world leader in the exhibition and exposition field. She was happy with the job and had no intention of changing jobs at this stage.

Xiawei

Xiawei, 29 years old, was from Shanghai. He held a college degree and has been working for a Sino-foreign automobile company for eight years. He found his current job relaxing, not too stressful, so he did not intend to change jobs.

Wangyuan

Wangyuan, 26, was originally from Shanghai. Obtaining his first degree from a non-elite university in Shanghai, he studied in the UK and achieved two master's degrees in finance and marketing. Up to the interview, he had been working for a top foreign consultant company for about one year. He found that the job was difficult and demanded a lot of his time but it was challenging.

Wenbin

Wenbin, 25 years old, was from Shanghai. He graduated from an elite university in Shanghai. His major was in computing design and was currently working for a leading foreign IT company, where he had been for three years. At the time of the interview, he was applying to study a master's degree or a PhD degree in the USA, as he found his self-development in the company seemed to have slowed down.

Jiawei

Jiawei, 28 years old, came from a small city near Shanghai. Obtaining her first degree in a non-elite university in Shanghai, she went to the UK for a master's degree in human resource management. During her study in the UK, she met a friend in the class, who recommended her for a middle-management job in a medium-sized foreign furniture company. She found her professional background did not totally cover the demands of her job, but the process of learning new things made her job exciting.

Zhijian

Zhijian, 37 years old and from a small town outside Shanghai, was a department manager in a private Chinese IT company. He graduated from an elite university in Beijing and had intended to set up his own business in the early stage of his career. After not succeeding in doing so, he came to Shanghai and had worked for this company for about 2 years by the time of the interview.

5.4.1 The views of the labour market in Shanghai

In general, the working interviewees shared the views that the competition in the labour market was fierce; that is, skill supply exceeded skill demand, especially in the high skill sectors. One of the reasons is that Shanghai attracts more people to compete for limited job opportunities. As a prime economic centre, Shanghai was seen as offering

more and better job opportunities than anywhere else. Therefore, all sorts of talented people tended to rush into Shanghai. Particularly, the growth in competition was perceived to be related to the migration of highly skilled people into Shanghai, from both domestic and international origins. The increase in the number of competitors in the labour market was identified as being greater than the growth in matching opportunities.

Wenbin: *'Shanghai, with huge potential development and competitiveness, is full of opportunities. Shanghai is not only an economic centre in China, but also has attracted attention from all over the world. In this situation, more and more talented people are coming into Shanghai. So the competition is getting more and more fierce.'*

Jiawei: *'The biggest feature of the Shanghai labour market is the fierce competition. As Shanghai is a centre, all sorts of talented people are rushing into Shanghai. The competition is very cruel. Besides, relevant to this, opportunities are more than before, but still limited. It is critical how to seize the opportunity under such fierce competition.'*

Hanfei: *'Opportunities and risks co-exist. For example, due to economic globalization, many multi-national companies set up their branches in China. Under this circumstance, there is an increased demand for people who can not only offer professional skills but also have a good mastery of foreign languages. To some extent, it is a big challenge to those professionals. However, it generates more job opportunities.'*

Wangyuan: *'There are two major industries: modern manufacturing industry and modern service industry. As to the higher education expansion, it is not difficult, or I can say too easy, to find intermediate skill providers. However, the skill demand for the modern service industry, such as consultancy, is still great.'*

The last two statements showed that the competition in the intermediate skill level was perceived to be increasingly intense, whereas there were still spaces for 'really high skilled professionals' in the Shanghai labour market. Hanfei recognized the changing economic development, such as globalized economy, required different skills. Also, later in the interview, she reckoned that '[As to the higher education expansion] *there is plenty of skill supply in the intermediate skill level. I have seen that several bachelor*

degree holders were competing for a reception job which used to be only open to college graduates. I think it is kind of over-education. Too many university graduates, but limited relevant or skill matched positions. In the principle of meritocracy, employers would choose those with higher educational degrees but pay the same salary.' With the increasing over-supply of skilled personnel, skill demanders controlled the negotiation of the terms of employment.

The working interviewees pointed out that there was still a skill deficit in certain industries or fields, which they related to over-education in the context of higher education expansion. They further explained that in the context of marketized higher education, people enjoyed autonomy in choosing majors and universities in which to study. In this sense, people would wish to choose the subjects which were perceived to generate the greatest financial return. On sensing the demand, higher education institutions also expanded certain courses. This might lead to the phenomenon that certain areas or industries might have over-educated applicants or an over-supply of talented people, while there might be a talent deficit in other fields.

In a brief summary, compared to the student interviewees' opinions on the labour market, the working interviewees had a broader understanding of this concept. They thought of the labour market as competition among talented people in terms of employment, or the general supply of and demand for skills. A certain amount of experience and participation in the workforce had expanded their understanding, rather than simply thinking of the labour market as a careers fair. Also, the working interviewees described the labour market and its competition in more detail, using more sophisticated terms, such as market demand and supply.

5.4.2 What is perceived as a good job?

The working interviewees emphasized more that a good job should

- 1) meet their interests;
- 2) provide space for self-development and realization of personal value;
- 3) have a good developmental potential; and
- 4) offer a healthy work environment.

In comparison with the student interviewees, firstly, some of the working interviewees agreed with the view that their interest in a job would motivate their enthusiasm to work. In addition, the working interviewees also related the type of the job to their character (individual level) and the need of the market (structural level). Not only personal characteristics and personal experiences had been taken into consideration in terms of judging what makes a good job, but also the interviewees thought it necessary to analyze what kind of skills the job was asking for and what kind of positions were in greatest demand in the market.

Hanfei: *'If you want to do your job very well, you need to see if you are interested in this job. This starts from analyzing your character. For example, if you are an open person, maybe jobs like marketing suit you more; ... if you are a quiet person, you may be good at jobs like accounting. This is just my view. It also depends on what society needs and what society is developing towards. After knowing all these, we can start to design and decide our career development.'*

On the one hand, Hanfei considered and made her career decision on the basis of structural factors, such as the market demands at a structural level. On the other hand, she also took their personal factors into account at an individual level. We can see this as a reflexive project where Hanfei combines her knowledge of herself with that of what the world is like to analyze and make her career plan.

Secondly, a good job was perceived by the working interviewees as one which offered the individual adequate space for self-development and recognition of personal value. The interviewees considered personal improvement and making progress on the job as not only a substantial opportunity for skill formation but also as an essential psychological element for satisfaction. Moreover, some interviewees also saw self-fulfillment as a lifelong process, which people could obtain from work. Their judgments of a job were linked with a personal desire for continued self-development.

Hanfei: *'After four years' working, I am more confident. Currently, I am thinking of changing my job, because I have realized my aim of improving my skills in terms of this job position; and I also find if I stay in this position longer, I will not obtain any other new experience. I would like to face more challenges and learn more. So, to me, a good*

job will allow me more space for continuous self-improvement under pressure and challenge. Self-improvement should be constant. Anyway, it is my opinion.'

Related to this, the working interviewees generally agreed that people would show their personal skills and knowledge in the course of making contributions to the society or community; in the process of doing which their personal value would be recognized. By doing so, people would enjoy their success, gain respect from others, and then would achieve higher status in society. This was indispensable in personal development, because it could motivate people to keep on. In other words, a good job was connected with high social status.

Xiawei: *'When we try our best to get into a company, we start to work hard and to show people our abilities. Once our skills and knowledge are recognized by others, we will be respected. Not only getting a job gives people high social status, but also doing the job excellently, showing our abilities and being recognized by others are also part of it.'*

Third, the interviewees considered the potential for development of a company and an industry as another criterion for a good job. This point was related to the size and scale of a company. The interviewees tended to think both small and big companies had advantages and disadvantages. Working in a small company might provide people with chances to see the whole process within the company; that is, people needed to know everything about the company and take on more responsibility as a whole. However, working in a big company, everyone would be assigned their responsibility and tasks clearly. Thus, working at big companies one could develop certain skills in-depth and master knowledge in certain area thoroughly. Also, big companies might have a 'big' reputation and have rich customer resources; staff skills, professional as well as interpersonal skills, would be developed at a higher level. To judge which type of company was more suitable for someone, it was necessary to know one's own goals. Once one knew what one aimed for, one could make an effort in that direction.

Meanwhile, some interviewees added their opinion that, irrespective of which kind of companies people worked for, as long as the industry still had potential for development, as long as it was a healthily-developing company, people would gain and improve

themselves in terms of relevant skills and knowledge. This point was to some extent related to the fourth element mentioned – working environment.

Fourthly, the working interviewees agreed with the student and graduate interviewees' view that a healthy work environment was prerequisite for a good job. By a healthy environment the interviewees meant a variety of chances for individual workers to improve themselves without being distracted by interpersonal relationship issues. Rather than directly pointing to jobs available in foreign companies, some working interviewees maintained that Chinese companies, both state-owned enterprises and private companies, were changing their organizational culture and trying to build a positive atmosphere for skilled talent development, especially in the context of global and domestic competition. Therefore, to them, it did not matter which type of company one worked for, just as long as it provided a healthy working environment.

Jiawei: *'From a long-term view, if you do not have any economic support or material support, and if you hope to make progress on your career development, you have to choose those companies with positive organizational culture. Those companies will encourage your creativity and innovation, and will integrate everyone into the whole team.'*

Hanfei: *'I know lots of Chinese domestic companies are catching up with their foreign counterpart. But currently, I still think foreign companies will be my aim. The management level in those companies is higher than that of domestic ones. They pay more attention and emphasis to employees' skill training and development. They encourage people to innovate and create their ideas. That is really important.'*

Apart from the four perceived criteria for a good job, the working interviewees did not see salary as an overriding condition. Neither did they emphasize that a good job had to be white-collar. The interviewees stated that salary depended on one's work and achievement; if one worked hard and achieved well, one's salary would increase automatically.

5.4.3 The perceived selection criteria for employment

Like the students, the working interviewees considered the competition in the Shanghai labour market to be fierce and intensive. The changing economic and social situation has brought new requirements in all aspects of work. The more experienced working interviewees agreed that no matter how uncertain and risky the labour market became, the most important thing for success was to possess substantial skills and abilities.

Wenbin: *'Feeling scared... how shall I put this? There are too many people in China, it is the same everywhere. In fact, as long as you have substantial skills and abilities, you do not need to feel scared. We should not compare with others; instead, we need to think of how to improve ourselves.'*

Jiawei: *'Why should I be frightened by the fierce competition, if I have skills and abilities?'*

Compared with the students, these interviewees seemed to think about 'positional' advantages more in terms of skills and abilities, rather than qualifications. Two of the interviewees mentioned that different skills and abilities might become their special 'selling points' which might enable them to stand out among a group of competitors.

Zhijian: *'To succeed in our study or work, we need to have our own strong points or special skills, to be outstanding.'*

What are these skills and abilities? How did the working interviewees define them?

5.4.4 Skills and abilities

The working interviewees emphasized different aspects of skills and abilities. First, they agreed professional skills and knowledge formed one set of skills people must have. These were the basic skills needed to find a job. However, they also mentioned that professional skills and knowledge could be improved and developed at work. This point will be raised later in relation to the importance of work experience.

Second, the importance of soft skills was reiterated by all the mature interviewees: teamwork, logical thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, and self-judgment skills.

These skills formed an indispensable part of an employee's skill package. The following quotes showed a sort of folklore support for the importance of hard work.

Zhijian: *'Now, lots of work has been changing, not only the work content, but also the nature of the work. We have to be more self-motivated, to think more, and to be creative and innovative. We can't always follow others, but need to walk our own path, especially in the computer science industry and those design-oriented fields.'*

Third, like the student interviewees, the working interviewees believed that being hard-working, reliable and responsible were essential ethics for an employee.

Jiawei: *'In my opinion, an active attitude towards working is of great importance. We have an old saying in China that a person should make his every effort, first and foremost, to accomplish his job responsibilities.'*

Zhijian: *'One of the elements for success to me is hard-work. If I am asked to give suggestions to new graduates, I would like to suggest not being picky on those jobs, but just to do it and work hard on it. After a period of time, they will learn something for sure.'*

Fourth, it is interesting that 'xin tai' was repeatedly mentioned by the working interviewees. It was pointed out that people needed to be well-prepared for frustration, uncertainties and risks in the labour market. As they had already been engaged in employment, they related the frustration and uncertain situations more to their work, the workplace, and their own experience.

Liyang: *'Our life will not be smooth at all. We will confront troubles and difficulties all the time. So good psychological quality and self-adjustment will help us to deal with those problems in a more relaxed and more efficient way, and we will not be frustrated.'*

Wangyuan: *'Xin tai is very important, particularly to those with no work experience. ... I mean, as a new staff member, how you think of yourself as a new comer, how you deal with something that you have never dealt with, how you deal with the relationship with your manager and colleagues. As a new member in a new environment, there are*

certainly things you have never come across, either technically or interpersonally. It depends on one's personal psychological quality. That is what I call xin tai.'

Wangyuan entered a leading auditing company after studying abroad for two master's degrees. At first, he found most of his colleagues were of the same age as him, with only bachelor degrees but more experience. He felt he needed to be modest and learn from them. Wangyuan suggested that educational degrees did not equate with work experience in the real world of work – a point that will be raised again later.

In a brief the working interviewees generally shared the same views of skills and knowledge as those of the student interviewees. Different opinions between the student and the working interviewees on the selection criteria for jobs were shown in the following aspects, however.

5.4.5 Educational capital

The working interviewees commonly denied the significance of educational capital in relation to employment. Educational degrees and qualifications were perceived as significant for the first-time labour market entrant, but definitely not for the experienced competitor: work experience meant more than qualifications to both themselves and employers.

Hanfei: *'Qualifications can be very essential to those new graduates who are looking for jobs for the first time, but not for those experienced workers.'*

Later still, she also agreed that *'a bachelor degree is surely needed anyway'*, due to the situation of higher education expansion and credential inflation. This suggests that there were some confusions or contradictions in Hanfei's views. However, from another point, it reveals that qualifications played a structural role in the labour market competition.

Despite not emphasizing the value of educational qualifications, the working interviewees still expressed their opinions on different educational currencies and the irrelative values.

-- Inter-qualification competition

From either a human capital theory or positional competition viewpoint, the higher a degree, the more value it has, and the more advantages its holder has. This view was partly agreed to by the working interviewees. Several interviewees expressed their opinion that with the increasing level of the degree, the individuals' experience and knowledge would be expanded and upgraded. Meanwhile, the individual's expectations of their 'appropriate' working position would also increase.

Jiawei recounted an experience which illustrated the potentially close relationship between the development of higher levels of human capital (higher degree) and social capital, which together constitute a large part of personal capital. Jiawei had obtained a master's degree from a foreign university. She believed that her skills, knowledge and view points were improved through her experience of studying abroad; and the increase in her human capital made her confident she could find a higher-level job. Luckily, after her graduation, one of her classmates recommended her for a managerial job in a foreign company. Therefore, to her, the experience of studying abroad also expanded her social network.

Jiawei: 'To me, the higher your degree is, the more profound your viewpoint is; both from a social level and social network level. Therefore, your personal expectation naturally goes up.'

On the one hand, the interviewees admitted that higher education expansion provided people with more opportunities to improve their competitiveness and develop their skills. However, on the other hand, the interviewees largely agreed that the higher education expansion in China affected the relative value of the degrees; that is, as the number of the degree holders increased, the relative value of the degrees decreased. Liying, with five years' work experience but possessing only a college degree, thought of herself as having no advantages compared with new university graduates. To her, a university degree was 'hard currency'. Although she had a job, she still felt her opportunities in the labour market were constrained by her low educational capital, especially after higher education expansion has created too many graduates.

On the other hand, the interviewees did question the statement that a degree represented the holder's innate skills and knowledge. They particularly related this to the exam-oriented and rigid/passive learning features of the Chinese education system. It was widely believed that, no matter how high a degree was, it could not indicate the holder's real abilities; and that the traditional Chinese education lacked practical knowledge, while work experience would improve a person's real skills.. This view was particularly emphasized by the working interviewees.

Hanfei: *'I do not think a high degree can show or assure that its holder has good abilities and skills. ... I find largely skills are only developed at work, from your working experience. It is more important to accumulate working experience.'*

-- Institutional hierarchies

Compared with the student interviewees, the working interviewees emphasized less the reputational level of universities as a selection criterion for jobs. Only Wenbin, who graduated from an elite university in Shanghai, mentioned possible reasons why an elite university degree might make a difference to its holder: students in elite universities could demonstrate better academic performance, because those students had achieved higher scores in the university entrance exams, and they were also considered as especially hard-working. This could create a good peer-learning environment for all students, which encouraged them to progress further. Therefore, Wenbin argued that these students' comprehensive skills, qualities and knowledge should be more profound and developed than their counterparts.

Wenbin: *'Which university you come from does matter to some extent in China. The university will mark a brand on you. Different universities will bring you different environments. Also, in China, I find lots of people get lost once they are enrolled in university, which is largely due to the Chinese education system. Chinese students only know how to get a qualification. ... I mean not everyone has a definite aim, so an institutional environment can play a vital role. Some universities have very strict rules and have a better academic environment. In that case, students' level of skills and qualities will go up like boats going up with the level of the water.'*

In Wenbin's opinion, the Chinese educational culture, as exam-oriented and emphasizing memorization, to some extent might not have a positive influence on students' personal development. Students would easily see education in a more instrumental way. However, it was usually believed that elite universities had more professors, which might offer better quality of teaching. So, once entering a top-level institution which provided better teaching and learning, students would be submerged and naturally develop their skills and qualities to a higher level. Also, if students were surrounded by hardworking peers, they would be influenced and be more hardworking.

More often, the working interviewees referred the intra-qualification competition to the competition between Chinese university degrees and foreign university degrees. They found that there was another group of credential-bearing competitors emerging, which made the picture of the labour market competition even more complicated and fierce.

Hanfei: *'... Shanghai is a place full of potential development. It means opportunities and competitions to people. ... In terms of human resources, there are two kinds of talents, one is trained by our country, like Chinese universities, and the other is from overseas. These two groups are clearly divided. No matter which group of competitors, the competition is so fierce. ... The competition is both among and within those groups.'*

Currently, more and more people are studying abroad. When they come back, they largely look for jobs in big cities like Shanghai and Beijing, as it is in the cities that the best jobs are to be found. The interviewees felt that people in general valued foreign studies and degrees more than Chinese degrees, especially degrees from Europe and America. The graduates from overseas universities would usually be advantaged in professional and interpersonal skills, and accordingly could obtain better salaries and other welfare. However, several interviewees, who were mostly from the elite universities in China, thought that overseas study experience and degrees might not be necessarily be better than those of Chinese universities. They thought the 'over emphasis' on foreign degrees was more due to popular bias.

Wenbin: *'Lots of employers still do not realize the situation totally. I mean it is obvious that people with the foreign degrees are more advantaged... even if two people have the same ability and skills, the one with foreign degree will be definitely more advantaged'*

than the other. ... But I suppose people who have foreign study experience are better at the aspects of communication skills and creativity, etc. Maybe they are better at those aspects than domestically trained talents. But it is difficult to say...

Wenbin was from an elite university in Shanghai and therefore, clearly had his own self-regard to defend. He was doubtful about the view that foreign degrees must be better. However, he did think that a foreign degree would help its holder in the competition in Shanghai. It was also interesting to note that earlier in the interview he expressed his intention to study a master's course in the USA, saying that he would like to improve his professional skills and himself as a whole.

Two of those interviewees with overseas experience both believed that their experience abroad enabled them to improve in different aspects, soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills, language skills, and 'hard' professional skills. Such experience might not be offered in a traditional Chinese educational context.

Wangyuan: *'Comparing my study experience in China and abroad, I find ... the most important is that my English improves a lot. When I lived in a different cultural context, I learned a lot of stuff which I had not known before. My mind is opened up. I also learned how to survive on your own, such as thinking independently, working independently, living independently. ... In general, I just think the education in western countries is really different from that in China.'* (Wangyuan)

The interviewees were, however, of the opinion that education and training in Shanghai were generally among the best in China. Although no interviewee directly pointed out that Shanghai universities' degrees were perceived to be more valuable, they did mention that the general level of education was much higher than in other places in China, especially in foreign language training, information technology and up-to-date professional skills and knowledge.

5.4.6 Work experience

Work experience was considered by the working interviewees to be an essential factor in personal success in the labour market; its role was considered more important than that of educational qualifications, but a combination of degree and work experience was

seen as crucial to a person's competitiveness. It was commonly perceived that academic credentials and work experience were complementary and yet could be equated to each other.

Jiawei: *'If I have a master degree but with only two or three years' working experience, compared to another competitor who only has a college degree but with seven years' working experience, I think we are equal to each other. We are standing at the same starting point [in the labour market competition]. ... but the same example, but the other competitor is a bachelor degree holder, and then I think the competitor is stronger and more advantaged than me.'*

There was an implicit equation of years of experience to a degree level, and with an increase in either of them, the competitor would be more advantaged.

Sharing the views of the student interviewees, the work interviewees commonly agreed that work experience would improve one's professional skills and knowledge, interpersonal skills and transferable skills. Also, work experience could bridge the gap between theories learnt from university and practice in the real world of work. In addition, they expressed the opinion that work experience could denote the individuals' social experience, making contact with different people, experiencing different aspects of social life, etc. It was commonly believed that a certain amount of work experience would improve and strengthen the person's social connectivity or network, such as 'customer resources' and 'public/personal relations'. In other words, work experience would help to increase and develop one's social capital.

Apart from these reasons for self-development in terms of professional and soft skills and social capital, the interviewees perceived the importance of work experience through either their own experience of employment or their observation of the labour market through recruitment advertisements. It was mentioned that a certain period of work experience appears and is required or preferred in those advertisements. These views were particularly emphasized by the student or new graduate interviewees.

Hanfei: *'Working experience is so important, because when I go to those careers fairs, almost every company asks for two or three years relevant working experience.'*

In contrast to the students' view, the working interviewees not surprisingly seemed more confident about their position in terms of work experience. Work experience was perceived as their advantage, such as when they decided to change their jobs. The older interviewees also suggested that students needed to try their best to get involved in placements during studies, so as to accumulate more experience. At the same time, the work interviewees also had suggestions for new graduates:

Zhijian: *'I think ... to a new graduate, once you find a job, don't be too picky. Do your best, work hard, make every possible effort... after two or three years, you can always learn something.'*

It is noteworthy that the working interviewees also saw people with three to five years' work experience and with a bachelor degree at least as the most competitive group in the labour market. It was because these competitors were usually in their late twenties, considered to be a golden age, with rich work experience and good EQ.

5.4.7 Family background and *Guanxi* capital

The working interviewees agreed with the students that family background could play a role in improving individuals' standing in the labour market in China. Specifically, family background could be related to the notions of cultural capital and *guanxi* capital, as discussed above (section 5.3.6).

Liyang: *'From a positive perspective, if a person has better family background, he will have more social connections. He will have more information, recommendations and help than other people from ordinary families. However, from a negative perspective, the family background is a resource to open the 'back door' [to employment] wider. This situation in employment is unavoidable.'*

Here, the value of a combination of social capital ('help') and cultural capital ('information and recommendations') was shown. On stating the role of *guanxi* capital, Liyang had a negative opinion on the role of social capital in employment. However, it was perceived to be in vain to deny its existence and its structural role of distributing individuals' life chances. Furthermore, the interviewees showed their awareness of the complexity of sources of advantages, as Xiawei explained:

Xiawei: *'Guanxi capital is so important, very important. ... The first is the family background, that is, if you are from a wealthy family; let alone if you are from a noble [high social status] family. If you have a father or even an uncle who is at the high social rank in the society, you will be easily promoted or offered a great deal of opportunities. ... if you are from a wealthier background, you may enjoy a variety of economic resources, which leads you to a privileged position to possess more resources.'*

5.4.8 Locality: Shanghai residents vs. non-Shanghai residents

In general, the working interviewees maintained that the role of the *hukou* system in restricting people from other parts of China working in Shanghai had faded due to the changing policy, such as the introduction of the scheme to attract those with talent and skills. Also, the role of the *hukou* system became even weaker with the emergence of different types of business ownership, with greater autonomy.

Wangyuan: *'The municipal government has launched a series of policies on attracting skilled talents to work in Shanghai. As long as one has strong professional skills and knowledge, one would be awarded a place in Shanghai, or at least he or she would be able to stay in Shanghai.'*

Hanfei: *'Companies in the private sector, like those multi-national companies and private-owned companies, they do not care about if you have a Shanghai hukou.'*

These interviewees were highly aware that companies in the private sector paid more attention to profit making and employers would do their best to employ the best applicants with regards to their skills to knowledge and without regard to their origin, in order to maximize the company's gain.

However, the interviewees also perceived a difference within the private sector, namely between the private-owned and foreign companies. According to the interviewees, multi-national companies especially European and American companies, emphasized skill improvement and talent development. From this point of view, foreign companies in Shanghai employ people from different places, as long as applicants met their skill

requirements. But, Chinese private companies were considered as a new-born baby in China with a relatively short history. In their early stage of development, the aim of gaining profit was foremost. The interviewees pointed out that people with no Shanghai *hukou* usually asked for a lower salary, so as to get a job first and settle down in Shanghai. Under this circumstance, non-Shanghai residents asking for a lower salary matched private companies' goal of cutting costs and making profit as much as possible.

Liyang: *'In the trading industry, there are so many people from outside Shanghai. The hukou system does not work. ... those [non-Shanghai] residents ask for a really low salary from employers. I think with the similar qualifications, they can only compete with us [Shanghai residents] by decreasing their wage.'*

This view was expressed by all working interviewees from Shanghai. However, those who are not originally from Shanghai have a different view on this. To them, as long as they have 'real skills and abilities' and 'higher qualification', they can stand at the same starting point or level as their Shanghai counterparts. It is also interesting to note that two of the policy-maker interviewees still thought that the *hukou* could play a significant role in employment in some governmental organizations (see below).

Despite the above, some interviewees, largely students, believed that to have a Shanghai *hukou* is still quite important in the labour market competition. One of the reasons was linked to higher education expansion. After the higher education expansion, more and more bachelor degree holders competed in the labour market. For new graduates with no work experience, a Shanghai *hukou* could possibly play a role of membership to protect the Shanghai resident graduates and to secure their position in the labour market to some extent. But again, the interviewees pointed out that this membership protection seemed only to work at an undergraduate level. Postgraduate non-Shanghai residents still had a chance to compete and even succeed in the competition.

Hanfei: *'To local students, I mean those whose hukou is originally in Shanghai, employment is not a problem. But to those students from outside Shanghai, the government has a policy of choosing the best. To me, I find those non-Shanghai applicants with master degrees or above find it easy to stay and work in Shanghai, but not for those undergraduates. The situation for those undergraduates is really*

serious. ... I will not see all those non-Shanghai applicants as my competitors. Only those with several years' working experience... I think of them as my competitors.'

Again, here a complex employment calculation or equation is used. Work experience and a higher education degree were perceived to have a positive value. This value was also considered greater than the negative value of not having a Shanghai *hukou*.

The working interviewees shared a view that Shanghai residents should not think of the *hukou* as their protection. They might feel high pressure in the labour market since more and more people have come into Shanghai, but this should not be their major concern or worry. To the interviewees, as Shanghai people grow up and live in an environment of rapid change and development, it should be easier for them to integrate into such a competitive context. This should be an advantage to them. With the city's history of being open to the outside world, its population had more chances to experience and communicate with the outside world. Hence, Shanghai people should have better knowledge, understanding and experience, which can counteract their relative disadvantage of facing more competitors.

Jiawei: *'Well, in my opinion, students with a Shanghai hukou should not worry. Growing up in Shanghai is their advantage. Growing up in such a competitive and fast developed environment and being influenced by this environment, the Shanghai students experience more things. Naturally, their abilities in all aspects should be stronger than their counterparts. It will offset the negative conditions in their competition in the labour market.'*

In brief, the *hukou* system was perceived to be less influential and present fewer restrictions on people who did not have it than it used to. Moreover, the Shanghai government was trying to attract skilled people to work in this 'developmental city' (Brown, *et al*, 2001). The changes in the *hukou* system could increase the number of competitors in the Shanghai labour market. Different stakeholders would make use of these changes to maximize their return according to their own interests. In other words, people and companies were clearly aware of these changes. However, at the same time, the influence of the *hukou* system was to some extent deeply-rooted in people's minds and has not been changed completely.

5.4.9 An initial discussion on the working interviewees' views on the labour market competition

In brief, the working interviewees shared the view points that contemporary social and economic developments in China, such as globalization and marketization generated opportunities as well as uncertainties and risks in terms of individuals' lives and employment. Rather than feeling confused, lost or panicky, these interviewees had a relatively 'calm' attitude towards these changes. Moreover, compared with the student and graduate interviewees, they seemed to have more detailed and probably deeper knowledge about the labour market, as a consequence of their direct experience in it. They have personal experience and observations of the labour market, providing them with first-hand information.

There was a widely accepted view among the working interviewees that multiple factors should be considered to work together as selection criteria for employment and as co-elements in a personal employability package, such as work experience, educational capital, social networks and geographical origins. This general view was shared by both the student and graduate interviewees and the working interviewees; however, the two groups were likely to emphasize different aspects of these employability elements. First, for example, educational capital was lower rated by the working interviewees, as they believed that educational qualifications could only be significant or indispensable for first-time labour market entrants. The credentials would not tell employers what one could do and would not necessarily assure the productivity or performance of the holders. Second, to them, it was the real skills and abilities which were more derived from work experience that located them in a relatively advantaged standing to their student counterparts. Third, instead of summarizing information obtained from the media or job advertisements, their first-hand information on required skills and knowledge was obtained from their direct experience at work. Through engagement in different tasks at work, the skills which one might lack and which one might be good at could be identified. After finding out the skill gap, one could set up one's goals in terms of self-improvement.

When asked whether they intended to change jobs and how they would promote their employability, again, mixed views emerged but with a strong implication of a purists'

strategies. As purists, the interviewees stressed what they could offer to employers, such as their updated professional skills, their desire to learn, wonderful social skills from the previous work, etc, rather than emphasizing where they had studied, or what kind of degrees they had. In identifying of their potential competitors, the working interviewees clearly showed their confidence over their student counterparts, because of the latter's lack of work experience and accordingly, lack of practical knowledge and skills.

5.5 The view of the employers and the policy-makers

After presenting the perceptions of the student interviewees and the working interviewees, who are at one end of the labour market as skill suppliers, this section will offer the data from the interviews with the employers and policy-makers.

Ouyang

Ouyang, in his late thirties, was originally from Shanghai. After obtaining a first degree from a non-elite university in China, he went to work in Canada and continued by taking a master's degree in the UK in the field of finance. Following this, he went to back to Canada and worked for a leading commercial bank. He was then appointed as the regional manager by the same bank in its Shanghai branch. He has been participating in one finance course in STTP for the sake of interest.

Lingang

Lingang, in his late forties, originally came from a small town outside Shanghai, but has been living in Shanghai for more than 20 years. He took the university entrance exam after it was re-introduced in the very early of 1980s, and was enrolled in an elite university in Beijing where he majored in electric engineering. According to Lin, his job positions have been assigned throughout his career development rather than his having to apply for them, thanks to his educational background. Two months before the interview was conducted, Lingang was promoted again as a CEO in one of the biggest electricity supply companies in Shanghai, which was still state-owned. He attended one STTP course in human resource management a few years ago, and was currently taking an e-MBA course in his leisure time which was paid by the company. His position as a general manager in a state-owned company offered him a respectable social status in Lingang's opinion.

Chancellor Zhu

Chancellor Zhu, in his early sixties, was a chancellor in a non-elite university in Shanghai. This university was famous for its IT and computing courses, and has been actively involved in designing and planning the STTP programme. As a chancellor responsible for teaching and learning, Mr. Zhu has participated in the STTP committee meetings.

Director Wu

Director Wu is a director of a district Personnel Bureau in Shanghai. The Personnel Bureau is a governmental organization, responsible for overall planning, managing and developing personnel services. This organization also existed in the earlier job-allocation system. According to Director Wu, the organization has been undertaking some reforms with the emergence of a labour market; however, there is still a lot to be done to develop a 'real' labour market. During the interview, Director Wu talked a lot about his daughter, who was attending senior school in Singapore, in relation to his views and suggestions on the labour market competition.

Zhanghan

Zhanghan, originally from Shanghai, was currently organizing a training centre to run a course on vehicle testing. This training programme was administered by the Shanghai Municipal Labour and Social Security Bureau. This course could be seen as a parallel vocational skill course to that of STTP. Zhanghan was in his forties and has been working in the field of automobile manufacture.

Jiangping

Apart from the employers and the policy-makers, a teacher who has been teaching in STTP for more than ten years was also interviewed. Jiangping's full-time job was teaching in a university in Shanghai. Teaching in STTP was entirely due to her personal interest. She was in her forties and originally from Shanghai.

5.5.1 Views on the labour market and its competition in Shanghai

It was a majority view among this group that there was a mismatch between skill supply and skill demand in the Shanghai labour market. On the one hand, the higher education

expansion generated a group of university graduates, or rather, job seekers who were at intermediate skill level. But there were skill deficits in the high skill sectors. As Director Wu emphasized, certain industries in Shanghai, and in China in general, had skills and technology gaps compared with those in developed countries.

Wu: *'We certainly lack a large group of international talents. I mean those people who have rich work experience and skills at international standards.'*

Along with this viewpoint, the employer interviewees expressed that there was a skill gap in certain fields, such as modern financial services. Given the changing nature of work, multi-skilled workers were in great demand. For example, workers in the electricity industry were increasingly required to integrate different skills in their work, such as engineering design and customer services.

The other aspect of skill mismatch can be summarized as unbalanced skill supply. In the context of marketized higher education, students as customers can largely choose the subject they would like to study. Chinese students have tended to study those subjects perceived to generate great financial return; that is, an increasing number of students study economics, finance and engineering. In contrast, certain subjects were least popular, such as environmental science and history (Sina Exam, 2006). Thus, the employer and policy-maker interviewees shared a view that the competition for jobs could be extremely fierce in certain fields, while talented people needed to be attracted from outside Shanghai in some other areas. In the long term, the human resource development could be gradually trained within the local skill suppliers by extra education and training. However, in the short term, the skill-demand situation could only be alleviated by introducing skilled workers from outside Shanghai.

There were also some related points mentioned by the interviewees. First, from the skill supplier's perspective, inadequate and inaccurate information about the labour market was perceived as a major barrier to employment seeking. This was partly caused by poor career instruction and related services in the higher education institutions. It further led to the situation that the university graduates could not position themselves 'correctly' in terms of what sort of job they should look for.

Second, from the skill demand side, both the policy-maker interviewees, Director Wu and Chancellor Zhu, mentioned that there had been confusion in the past. It was commonly believed that judging the quality of a company used to depend on the number of PhD students or master's students working in this company. But, as the social reform went on, new ways of recognizing, developing and evaluating human resources were required. Here, all the interviewees emphasized that it was the candidates' skills, knowledge and abilities that mattered most. This seems to imply at least that these interviewees also did not equate education and certificates with the possession of skills and knowledge.

Director Wu: *'A really international talent should have profound professional knowledge, language skills and interpersonal skills.'*

There were an increasing number of degree holders with various educational backgrounds, such as domestic degrees and overseas degrees, doctoral degrees and master's degrees. Working with those different degree holders, employers had gained a better understanding of different educational credentials, which formed their new and according to Director Wu *'more rational and sensible'* selection criteria for candidates. This point will be extended in the following section.

In addition, Director Wu, comparing Shanghai with the situation of Hong Kong, argued that the development of a labour market in Shanghai was still in its early stage; the government still tended to control a large part of the 'market', which led to a relatively inflexible bureaucratic mechanism. He also maintained that the industry chain has not been formed yet, especially in regards to talent training. *'The government has not given enough attention to skilled workers. The education and training of skills are still in its early stage.'* This point will also be extended in the next chapter related to the STTP programme.

5.5.2 Employment selection criteria

In the interviews, the policy-makers and the employers were also asked about what elements or criteria they would use to select employees and how important these elements were. The views of the student interviewees and the working interviewees were supported; that is, a combination of different elements and factors would be taken

into effect. Particularly, it was perceived that educational capital acted as an entrance ticket; a few years' work experience secured a person's position; and additionally the role of a Shanghai *hukou* and a certain amount of social network could also help a person's success in the labour market. While these elements were defined as 'hard currencies', these interviewees, like the other student and working interviewees, reiterated that a person's real skills and knowledge are what matters in employment. No matter how much 'hard currency' one had, it was the real skills, knowledge and abilities that would determine one's ultimate success.

5.5.3 'Real' skills and knowledge

By real skills and knowledge, the interviewees referred to almost the same attributes as the previous interviewees; that is, basic professional skills, soft skills, ethics and '*xin tai*'. Particularly, the interviewees emphasized soft skills, ethics and '*xin tai*'.

Lingang: *'In a big company, everyone will have their own tasks or responsibilities. When we recruit staff, one thing that we pay a lot of attention to is self-judgement. Those capable members of staff need to make up their own mind and judgement in certain circumstances. They cannot go to ask their boss or supervisor every single time. If so, I have to think they might be useless. ... Yes, in the past, so called 'good members of staff' were those who could listen to their boss and follow their instructions. But now, it is different. Apart from following instructions to some extent, staff members have to be more independent minded.'*

Lingang: *'I have been working in different industries in my career. Up to now, I have generalized one word 'responsibility'. When first starting in the trading business, I had no knowledge about foreign trade at all. But I didn't give up. As long as one has responsibility, he or she will definitely do an excellent job and achieve his or her goals.'*

Ouyang: *'I hope those candidates can be modest. Being modest is an essential condition for those new entrants to the labour market. People need to have correct self-judgement. But they also need to balance their self-judgement and confidence.'*

Lingang: *'EQ is an important element for me when recruiting staff members. How do people deal with work or some accidents, both expected and unexpected? Whether this*

person has ability; whether he/she has EQ; whether he/she has good judgement. I value these characteristics a lot in recruitment.'

Chancellor Zhu drew attention to a combination of soft skills, ethics and 'xin tai' as critical factors in deciding one's success in the labour market: *'Predominantly, everyone should have an accurate analysis of himself or herself. Everyone has to know what one's advantages are and what one lacks. Everyone must know about oneself, such as one's personality, potentials, qualities, all aspects of oneself... Even one who is lucky and has a father who is a mayor or a government official, this person still needs to work from the very bottom of the career ladder, being hard working, diligent... there is a crucial task for universities, that is, to prepare students for the fierce competition. By preparation, I meant more psychologically. Students need to be fully prepared psychologically, and must have good 'xin tai'. They need to know that, in the process of job seeking, employers pay less attention to their professional skills and knowledge, as every organization will have a different organizational culture and they will train their employees at work. What employers care about is students' basic quality, including one's temper, manner, 'xin tai', quality, morality, etc. Students need to be strong and well-prepared to confront all the possible difficulties or frustration. They also need to learn how to engage in teamwork and need to be loyal. All these are very important to employers.'*

5.5.4 The role of educational capital

It was commonly agreed among the interviewees that a university degree was needed anyway in the current labour market. On the one hand, the innate value of a degree was suspected by the interviewees. On the other hand, however, the bottom line was that a person needed a university degree for employment, due to the higher education expansion which resulted in too many degree holders.

Lingang: *'I do not pay a lot of attention to the applicants' degrees and qualifications. With regards to their previous study, I do not emphasize these when employing people, also including their language skills. I think as long as you want to learn something, you can and will certainly achieve it. ... What I want to know from an applicant is if he or she has the desire to learn and work hard.'*

The reason why a university degree could not really tell employers about its holder's innate ability was related to the nature or characteristics of the Chinese education and training system. Director Wu directly pointed out that it was the fact that too many people had bachelor degrees that made it a basic requirement for employment. It did not necessarily mean the higher the education level, the better, as different work positions asked for different skills and knowledge.

However, it is interesting to see that there were mixed views within the individual interviewees. In the interview with Director Wu, he agreed earlier that university education provided students with general knowledge for their future jobs. Students needed to pick up and improve their professional knowledge in the future jobs. In other words, university education would help to ensure students used the same professional language, skills and knowledge. However, later on in the same interview, Director Wu emphasized again that a university degree could only act as an entrance ticket to the labour market and the real value of the qualification was 'nothing', as Chinese education was characterized as rote learning and repetition, which was not helpful or useful to develop an individual's real ability.

In terms of the institutional hierarchies, the policy-makers and the employers did not put as much emphasis as the student or the working interviewees on the value of an elite university degree.

Lingang: *'This kind of halo effect needs its special context. People probably all think elite university graduates are stronger and better qualified in every aspect; but whether it is true, we still need to see the specific situation.'*

Chancellor Zhu explained several possible reasons that made elite university degrees and non-elite university degrees different.

Chancellor Zhu: *'The main difference lies in two aspects. First, the students in different universities achieved different performance in the university entrance exams. Elite university students usually achieved higher marks than their non-elite university counterparts. But this does not really mean anything. It only showed that the elite university students may have a better command of senior school courses. So, this*

difference should not be emphasized too much. Second, the university planning is different in these two types of university. Their teaching resources and educational environment at elite universities may be better than their non-top counterparts. Their [elite universities] teaching strength, in terms of the number of doctors and professors, should be more or better than non-elite universities.'

But again, Chancellor Zhu to some extent tried to deny the difference between these two types of institutions: *'Also, different institutions will have different planning and organization in terms of teaching and learning, and different function of education. More often than not, an elite university may lay more emphasis on research and development; while a non-elite university places more effort on delivering specific and practical skills and knowledge. For example, the computer science department in Fu Dan University may be more focused on designing and developing technology; the computer science department in our university is more concerned with training students in practical techniques.'*

Again, here are mixed views. The chancellor agreed that different skills and knowledge could be delivered in different institutions; whereas, he argued that meeting different demands for skills required different education and training modes.

In relation to the competition between Chinese university degrees and overseas university degrees, Chancellor Zhu thought that the way employers chose and employed their staff was becoming more rational, and people's views on the different values of qualifications tended to be more 'mature':

Chancellor Zhu: *'In the early 1990s, people were quite panicky. It was a common view that the quality or the value of a company depended on how many PhDs, how many masters, how many people coming back from overseas they had. If the company had a few people graduated from Cambridge, Harvard, etc, it seemed these people would help to increase their company revenue. At that time, as long as you had a foreign degree, you would certainly be employed. But this situation was not rational. If the person with a foreign degree had less than or the same productivity as a person with a Chinese university degree, why would a company pay more to the person with the foreign degree? ... That is to say, the company needs to consider how to maximize its profit, not*

only which university you graduate from. The employers in Shanghai are very rational. They will not particularly prefer foreign degrees, but make their decision on an applicant's real ability. Very rational and sensible!'

From this university chancellor's perspective, employers generally were much more rational than they were ten or fifteen years ago. As more talented people came to compete in the Shanghai labour market, employers gradually developed a more informed view on the value of different qualifications, and learned how to make more rational choices in terms of maximizing profits. Again, this interviewee emphasized that Shanghai, as one of the leading cities in China's development, tended to have a more informed view. However, he also pointed out that, since the Chinese higher education reform and development was still slightly slower than that of other developed countries, university courses in certain new fields were not yet developed. In that case, people who took the course abroad would certainly enjoy an advantage in the labour market.

Chancellor Zhu: *'In addition, in those new fields, such as exposition and exhibition management, logistics, etc, relevant courses in these areas are still less available in Chinese higher education institutions. Here, if someone comes with a relevant degree from a foreign university and has taken part in a certain amount of work, he or she will definitely be advantaged and become the centre of attention.'*

It is noteworthy to see that the interviewee did not forget to emphasize the significant role of relevant work experience.

5.5.5 Work experience

In general, work experience was perceived as a complementary element to educational capital by the employers and policy-maker interviewees. The combination of educational credentials and work experience was significant in determining one's success in the labour market. Work experience was viewed as a way to improve one's professional skills and knowledge, EQ and soft skills. Ouyang pointed out that one's work experience did not necessarily have to be long, but *'a certain amount of work experience, say two years, could tell me how flexible and how capable this candidate is'*.

These interviewees were at the same time aware that student employees would be at a disadvantage in terms of their work experience. The employer interviewees expressed the value of social activities or internship in judging student candidates' employability package.

Lingang: *'Educational degree and work experience are very important for me to select proper candidates. However, they are not the only criteria. If the candidates are students, their participation in social activities will all be accredited, such as their engaging in student union work. This kind of aspect can show one's communication skills, leadership, problem-solving skills, etc. to me.'*

On this point, almost all the interviewees suggested that students should make an effort to take part in all kinds of internship, to practice and to bridge the gap between what they learnt in university and what they would be confronted with in the real world of work.

Chancellor Zhu: *'Students should be actively involved in all kinds of activities and placement work. In addition to the programmes organized by the university, the students should make good use of holiday time to experience and to see the real society. It will help them in their transition from university to work.'*

Here, the need for a sense of self-responsibility could be inferred: rather than waiting to be allocated for placement, students were expected to take on their own career plans, including internship activities.

5.5.6 Other elements: *guanxi* capital and *hukou* system

First, the employer and policy-maker interviewees agreed that one's social network could help one to be more effective in achieving success. It is interesting to see and understand the role of social relationships for employers. Both Lingang and Ouyang, did not express a positive or negative opinion on this issue. Rather, Lingang provided another possible explanation for this significance of *guanxi*:

'We have basic direction or means to employ staff members. At a business meeting, if I am interested in your product or business or I am interested in your personal skills and

abilities, I will introduce you to work for my company. But there are also systems and policies for recruiting. In job interviews, why will those people whom I have already known have more advantages? If I know this person, I must have some information or knowledge about him or her. I can tell what his or her advantages and disadvantages are, so here the personal relationship works. However, if I do not know the person, it is difficult to make a judgement based on the first and the only chance of the interview. At that time, if someone says to me that he has known this applicant for three or five years, this will make a big difference. This applicant will also have a greater possibility of being employed.'

Here, we could see that not only were applicants, who are in the weaker position in employment, using social networks to succeed; but also employers made use of the resource to obtain the information they needed. Hence, *guanxi* capital is playing a reciprocal role.

Second, the role of the *hukou* system in relation to the labour market was perceived to be becoming less and less important. All the interviewees pointed out that changing social policy, such as the skilled worker scheme introduced in Shanghai, has weakened the restriction of the *hukou* in determining people's employment opportunity. Chancellor Zhu explained further:

'Along with the socio-economic reform, changes and adjustment have also been undertaken in relation to hukou system. To people from outside Shanghai, there are more opportunities for seeking jobs. As long as people have skills and knowledge, it is not difficult for those skilled workers to obtain a Shanghai hukou. On the other hand, from the perspective of Shanghai residents, there is increasing pressure caused by this policy change. However, I would not call this a threat. The aging population in Shanghai has expanded. With inadequate skill supply in certain areas, Shanghai needs people to work. Shanghai needs them, and an opening-up metropolitan city needs skilled workers.'

However, in the later part of the interview, Chancellor Zhu talked about those skilled workers in demand being mainly at the two ends of the skill ladder: low-skilled service

sector and high-skilled sector, as there are enough people at the intermediate skill level. This view was also shared by two employer interviewees.

5.5.7 An initial discussion on the employer and policy-maker interviewees' views on the labour market competition

As the employer and the policy-makers have high social status in the labour market, they did not mention how they felt about the competition. Rather, they gave a systemic analysis of skill demand and supply in the current labour market in Shanghai.

In Brown and Hesketh's research (2004), the employers' selection criteria for employability are divided threefold: suitability, an individual's skills and knowledge to do the job; proactivity, an individual's capacity to get things done and 'hit the ground running'; and acceptability, an individual's 'social fit' and 'personal chemistry' (such as family background, accents, manners and so on). From the interviews with the employers and the policy-makers, the threefold criteria were also identified, but with different relative emphasis. However, the limited number of the employer and policy-maker interviewees needs to be borne in mind. Firstly, the interviewees expressed the view that candidates needed to have basic industrial knowledge and professional skills, although these skills and knowledge did not need to be profound. Soft skills were also emphasized by the interviewees. These combined skills ensured candidates would be able to do the job. Secondly, the interviewees talked about their requirement for work experience. Rather than considered as a strong evidence to judge the 'hit the ground running' ability, the interviewees argued that work experience could to some extent reveal an individual's personal and social skills. Thirdly, the family background or the social network was also considered, as a way to gain information so as to judge the suitability of a candidate, rather than the 'corruption' interpretation.

5.6 Discussion: emergent issues from the data analysis

Through the analysis of the views expressed by the three interview groups and the quantitative data analysis, a comparison can be made with regards to the perceived factors constructing individuals' employability and facilitating individual success in the labour market competition. At first glance at the data, a number of views appear to be shared by the three groups.

- 1) Real skills and abilities mattered most in determining one's employability and therefore deciding one's success or failure in the labour market.
- 2) Among the factors influencing one's employability are professional skills and knowledge, soft skills, ethics and '*xin tai*'.
- 3) The other 'hard currencies' constituting one's employability package included educational capital, work experience, *hukou* system, social networks.
- 4) Work experience, as a way of developing and promoting one's 'real' skills, was considered to be of utmost importance.
- 5) In contrast, educational capital and qualifications were strongly perceived as screening devices and tickets into the labour market in building one's employability amongst the competition.

However, through a deeper analysis, differences among and even within the groups can be found, in line with the different social positions, resources and life experiences that individuals had.

- 1) The student interviewees emphasized the role of qualifications in employment more than their working counterparts.
- 2) The working interviewees widely held the view that work experience played a critical role in bridging the gap between theory and practice, in skill improvement and in fully developing one's comprehensive employability package; whereas the student interviewees placed relatively little importance on work experience because of their limited social experience and personal capitals.
- 3) While the students tried to make themselves stand out from the crowd by emphasizing all sorts of qualifications they had obtained, the working interviewees took their longer work experience as offering an advantage over their younger counterparts.
- 4) The student interviewees hold a negative opinion on the role of *guanxi* capital in seeking employment; whereas the working interviewees, according to their experience in the labour market, found *guanxi* could distribute people's life chances in employment.
- 5) The interviewees from elite universities showed their confidence in their degrees, as did those with foreign degrees. The non-elite universities students tended to show less confidence in terms of competing in the labour market with their educational credentials.

Through this analysis, there are three issues or points noteworthy of further discussion. First, reading through the individual interviewees' stories and statements suggests that individuals' construction and management of their employability can be seen as a reflexive project of the self. Individuals were knowledgeable agents. They were aware of and were to some extent constrained and/or assisted by the changing social world and social conditions. In this process, individuals understood who they were and their standing in the labour market through their direct or indirect experience. Based on these considerations and analysis, individuals would plan and design their own tactics to compete in the labour market.

The second issue is that being skilled and knowledgeable was no longer perceived to be adequate to win a secure position in the fierce labour market competition. Individuals attempted to grasp all sorts of alternative positional advantages to stand out of the crowd.

Third, under this circumstance, educational qualifications were seen to play a role of screening devices, rather than revealing one's potential productivity directly. This point could be related to the Chinese education and training system, in particular higher education, which will be explained in the following sections.

5.6.1 Constructing one's employability: making sense of the self

Managing and constructing one's employability and competition in the labour market can be regarded as a reflexive project, where individuals make sense of the self through the negotiation between institutional facts and other social forms and their cognitive experience (Wolfel, 2002; Billett, 2006). This relational interplay process between the social and individual is well illustrated by the conceptual framework of Giddens' structuration theory. Giddens argues that individuals, living and growing up in society, incorporate structural influences and at the same time are surrounded by both structural constraints and facilities (Giddens, 1984). Therefore, structural factors both enable and constrain the exercise of individual agency. However, structures do not exist independently (Healey, 2006); structures are reconstructed through individual actions and their experiences of the social system. Individual agents, situated in social settings, have the ability to transform the world around them through their social practice, as well as having the ability to reproduce it (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). This duality of

macro-micro level influences was revealed in the interviewees' accounts in this research. Rather than being separated, the macro- and micro-level factors need to be integrated in the analysis.

Giddens uses the concept of 'reflexivity' to connect 'agency' with 'structure'. Rather than a spontaneous response to structural forces, reflexivity involves individuals reflecting upon their actions in an attempt to understand, modify and monitor them (Scott, 1995). The concept refers to individuals' reflection upon what has happened and a prediction of what might happen in the future. In other words, reflexivity refers to the concept that the production and reproduction of social life is achieved through the knowledge of human beings. This reflexive process contains three elements: ontological security, practical consciousness and discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984). These three elements can be integrated into the discussion here.

-- Ontological security

The development of ontological security plays an essential role in understanding individuals' survival in times of uncertainty (Kenway and Bullen, 2000). Ontological security is a person's understanding of certain situations and spaces within her worldview and with which she feels comfortable and secure (Healey, 2006). The concept of ontological security denotes that human beings have a basic desire to have confidence and trust to predict their social life, no matter what changes take place in the society (Giddens, 1984).

In a traditional society, Giddens (1984) argues that people had a stable view and knowledge of the social reality, which informs and assists their actions. For example, the interview data in my study showed that before the socio-economic reform in China, there was a relative stable and fixed labour allocation system in which people could predict and believe that as long as one worked hard enough, the meritocratic system of education and work would ensure one's future position in it. Here, people could construct a coherent narrative of the 'self', feel comfortable with the way the world was and know what strategies to use to reach their target, such as working hard, being modest, or establishing social networks.

However, this personal 'basic security system' of social life was destabilized after the socio-economic reform of the 1980s, according to the interview findings. There was a widely held view among all interviewees that there had been considerable changes in the nature of work, the requirements for employment and how people were and should be engaged in the labour market competition. Under these circumstances, social life was seen to be increasingly filled with opportunities and hopes, on the one hand, and risks and uncertainties, on the other. The individual interviewees commonly expressed their 'scary', 'unstable', 'frightening' and 'uncertain' feelings towards the labour market competition. Several structural forces were identified and related to their unknown, unpredictable and uncertain social life, leading to a degree of existential anxiety. These forces could be further categorized into macro- and meso-factors. Macro-factors were related to issues of globalization and the socio-economic development in China and Shanghai; and the meso-factors focused on policy issues on, such as, the *hukou* system, the breakdown of the 'iron bowl' employment system and the expansion of higher education.

First, through various resources, such as media, peer information and more importantly self-experience in the labour market, individuals realized that there were increasing opportunities in the contemporary labour market in terms of job availability. Marketization in the Chinese economy created diversified enterprise mechanisms, such as state-owned companies, private companies and foreign companies. With the influence of globalization and the knowledge economy, new types of jobs and new industries emerged, which created further job opportunities, especially in the intermediate and high skilled sectors. Yet, individuals were also aware of the fact that the promised increase of opportunities was not unlimited. Taking other socio-economic changes into account, the interviewees clearly stated that the available skill supply exceeded the actual demand in the labour market in certain industries and skill sectors, which intensified the competition.

Shanghai, regarded as the economic centre of China, has been enjoying a privileged economic policy since the 1990s, and has attracted more foreign investment than other cities in China. Many skilled knowledge workers rushed into Shanghai and competed for employment opportunities. This further intensified the degree of the labour market

competition. With limited job opportunities but greatly increasing numbers of skilled workers, people felt insecure in winning a work position and sustaining themselves.

Second, changes in a range of social policies, such as the breakdown of the ‘iron rice bowl’ system, the reform of the *hukou* system and higher education expansion, were largely perceived as structural forces that leave individual agents alone in their labour market battle. First of all, the breakdown of the job allocation system forced individuals to be responsible for seeking their own employment. Jobs were no longer lifetime secured. To some extent, this change might free individuals to choose and seek jobs that met their own interests; but increasing self-responsibility was also required. They had to design their own career development and make their own decisions in the uncertain and rapidly changing context of the labour market. Secondly, the effect of the *hukou* system, although retaining its membership role in protecting the Shanghai residents was weakened as other additional talent schemes were introduced in Shanghai, particularly in the high skill sector. As long as people had high levels of skill and knowledge and were willing to make contributions to the city’s development, they would be assured of a position in Shanghai. Third, the higher education reform, including the marketization and expansion of higher education introduced new opportunities and risks to individuals. In general terms, the expansion of higher education allowed more people to have more equal access and opportunities to university education from which they would gain employable skills and knowledge. Yet, higher education expansion, despite meeting the needs of national development, reinforced the fierce competition by fostering and bringing far more employable graduates into the labour market. Also, the increasing autonomy given to students and parents to some extent freed their choices in terms of the subjects they might be interested in studying. For the purpose of achieving high educational return, students and the parents tended to apply for and study in the subjects and fields in, which they predicted that high returns would be generated in the future. As a result, there was an abrupt increase in the number of students in those fields. The limited availability of job opportunities might put the over-educated cohort at the risk of under-employment or even unemployment. To a large extent, the interviewees were well conscious of these policy changes and their impact on themselves and accordingly felt they were not confident with or could not trust their previous knowledge about the way in which social reality worked.

To sum up, the rapid socio-economic changes, as structural forces, challenged the individual actors' basic security system. The actors found that much of their previous knowledge could not assist their exertion of agency in unfamiliar changing conditions, and its use could result in unintended consequences. Instead, they had to re-develop a level of ontological security through gaining an understanding of or construing the structural forces within which they were living and working and through gaining an understanding of the levels of agency they can exert through social practices under these new structural forces (Healey, 2006). This process of redeveloping individuals' ontological security was approached through their experience, either direct or indirect, in their social and personal lives. The individual actors found that their previous knowledge in terms of seeking a job was inadequate or inaccurate for application in the new and unacknowledged conditions of the labour market. The consequences, either intended or unintended would become their future reference in re-building a security system that enables them to understand the new forms of social life.

-- Coping strategy

Being highly aware of the changes in the structures in the labour market and at the same time being constrained by certain socially and culturally structured forces, individuals, as knowledgeable agents, strove to guide, search and deploy different coping strategies as indicated by levels of social and/or cultural capital. The interview data revealed the individual actors' understanding and knowledge of the new system. There seemed to be a range of structures in the interviewees' minds in terms of how the labour market competition worked. Three general strategies were identified both explicitly and implicitly by the interviewees to cope with the fierce labour market competition; namely, being increasingly self-responsible, seeking for positional advantages over others while improving one's substantial skills and knowledge, and being hardworking, modest and having good '*xin tai*'. Using the terms from Giddens' structuration theory, these three coping strategies, seen as individual accounts of reasons and motivations for continual rational action, can be related to and can reflect discursive consciousness and practical consciousness (Scott, 1995).

First, the strategy of being increasingly self-responsible was closely linked to discursive consciousness and knowledge, as individuals identified it as a particularly influential factor in their social practice. The interviewees showed their strong realization and

understanding that in the context of the contemporary labour market, individuals needed to be ever self-reliant. As the new social life opened up opportunities for people in terms of both education and employment, individuals became freer to make choices about their participation in these diverse social opportunities and make their own choices (Scott, 1995). People could decide whether they would go on for a further education degree, whether to take a lifelong learning course, which kind of job to apply for, which kind of companies to work for, etc. Individuals were confronted with an increasing number of choices. Social life became a continuous process of decision-making. At the same time, individual actors were left to face the labour market competition. The government and the community imposed more responsibility on individuals. Before the socio-economic reform, individuals would be allocated a job for life. However, in the current society, with the diminishing of (national/local) protection mechanisms as well as the rapid socio-economic development in China, new uncertainties were generated in individuals' social lives.

The second coping strategy was identified as seeking for positional advantages while improving personal skills and knowledge. It again could be considered as discursive knowledge to influence the individual actors' actions. Firstly, the interviewees realized that both 'hard currencies' and 'soft currencies' would work together in building one's employability and deciding one's social position in the competition. Certain 'hard currencies', such as credentials and work experience, retained their essential roles; while the other factors, such as one's *hukou* and political status may only play an extra, marginal, rather than significant, role in assuring or protecting one's position in the competition. Individuals also found that a candidate with merely his education credentials would not be able to satisfy employment selection criteria. They were also asked for 'soft currencies' to show their employability, such as interpersonal skills, a good psychological attitude and quality to endure all sorts of difficulties at future work, and a commitment to hard work. This possession of 'soft currencies' was perceived greatly important to improve one's skill package.

Furthermore, the individual actors expressed strongly that a personal employability package amounted to more than having the 'hard' and 'soft currencies'. The value of their employability largely depended on 'how different' an individuals' personal package of skills and knowledge was from those of other candidates. For example,

despite not all the interviewees admitted its real value, they had to agree an elite university degree would be a more valuable to assist its holder to secure his or her standing in the competition. The individual actors needed to demonstrate to employers how they were 'special'. In a sense, individuals' perceptions of 'employability' went well beyond the technocratic view of human capital theory. There is a deeply-rooted belief in the meritocratic principle of competition, in which 'the best person wins', and the interviewees shared the view that seeking 'the extras' would ensure one's position in the labour market. 'The extras' include elite university credentials, high degree levels, other education and training qualifications, a few years' work experience which might show one's transferable skills. In other words, there was a structured ranking in the individual actors' mind which regulated that certain factors led to greater advantage. The structured ranking decided and constrained one's position in the labour market.

It can be concluded here that, so as to secure one's winning position in the labour market competition in Shanghai, individuals needed to not only improve themselves in terms of skills and knowledge, but also possess as many positional advantages as possible to stand out from the crowd.

The third coping strategy identified was to be hard-working and modest. From the interview data, there was a strong indication that the individual actors believed that to be hard-working and modest was a natural and taken-for-granted solution to improving one's employability and ensuring one's standing in the competition. An aspect of Chinese cultural values, which is so ingrained in people's experience, was taken as 'natural' and as an importance of 'ontological security'. The individuals' understanding of such a coping strategy can be considered as practical consciousness which guided their rational action. These attitudes were of great significance as indicators of and individual's 'good character' and as sources of success even before the socio-economic reform. Apart from these, people had their knowledge of the labour system and their understanding of how to succeed before the socio-economic reform. However, as the old system phased out, people found the old rules stopped taking effect in the new work context of a labour market and felt increasingly uncertain and insecure. They have to confront and tackle these new situations with updated knowledge and information. As Chinese, the interviewees stated clearly these Chinese cultural values, being hard working and modest and having '*xin tai*', would 'almightily' support one's

employability development and were firmly believed to play an ontological secured role in coping with the changing environment.

As the interview data were examined, another point became apparent. Apart from the above three common and general coping strategies, the individual actions taken to tackle their employability building and competition in the labour market varied among the individual interviewees. These actions can be understood in terms of their individual life stories as well as being blended with a range of social and cultural factors. People's perceptions were partly shaped by personal experience, friends' advice and experience and information from the media. This involves a process of an individual gaining knowledge, understanding and then reflecting on his or her action. Meanwhile, these life stories and experience were also mediated by the concept of 'frame of reference' (Brown, 1987). (See Table 5.6.1)

Table 5.6.1 The composition of one's employability (as 'frame of reference')

	basic indicators	relative advantages of the currencies
'hard currencies'	educational credentials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - postgraduate degrees (vs. undergraduate degrees or college degrees) - elite university degrees - oversea university degrees (vs. Chinese university degrees)
	work experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - work experience in the relevant areas - relatively long work experience
	<i>hukou</i>	- Shanghai <i>hukou</i> (vs. non-Shanghai <i>hukou</i>)
	political status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Party member (vs. non-Party member) - with social and community activity experience (e.g. participating in work in student union, etc.)
'soft currencies'	personal skills	- teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, analytical skills, etc.
	ethics/morality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - hardworking - modest - honest
	<i>xin tai</i>	- strong mind-set

For example, the student interviewee Yijin, through his own experience of studying in an elite university in Shanghai, identified that some leading companies only went to certain elite universities to offer careers fairs which in turn created the students' life chances. In addition, through his experience of seeking jobs, he found that the employers valued his internship which was shown on his CV. These life history or life episodes led to his realization of the importance of having an elite university degree and work experience. It also led to his identification of his privileged position in the employment competition, compared with his counterparts.

The student interviewee Shushu, graduated from a non-elite university, insisted that a person's real ability and skills mattered in building up her employability. However, she was strongly and clearly aware of her relatively disadvantaged position as a non-elite university graduate, according to her frame of reference of university hierarchies.

Shushu: *'It is hard to say, really hard. I mean ... personally, whether a university is good or bad depends on individual psychological adjustment. Actually, study is the same all around... we can not say that elite universities have better teachers and better academic environment, so their students must be better. ... As to the credentials, to be honest with you, I do not have confidence in myself at all. Studying in this non-elite university, I even needed a higher score in the entrance exam to be enrolled than those elite universities, but no matter what... this kind of university will always be a shame for me... to me who pays lots of attention to the ranking of a university, I feel uncomfortable and not confident.'*

Later on in the interview, she reiterated that having a non-elite university degree would be her regret or shame. As Brown (1987) suggests, the frame of reference can be seen as a mechanism within the development of Shushu's self-identity. In the later interview, Shushu talked about her plan to take postgraduate study in Australia. Her motivation was mainly driven by two reasons: to deepen and improve her professional skills in the accounting area and to make up her lost position caused by obtaining a non-elite university degree.

Here, we could argue that the individual actors had increasingly gained space for exerting their agency in a late modern society (Giddens, 1984). However, their action

was not totally free; or rather, the individuals were not totally empowered. Their action was still restrained by certain social and cultural factors and values. It can be suggested that individual action derives from the interaction between subjective self-identity and objective social conditions in which the person has lived and is living (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

5.6.2 The role of education, training and its qualifications in the Shanghai labour market

Another noteworthy issue was the perceptions of the role of education and training and qualifications in the Shanghai labour market competition. A strong sense of credentialism was revealed throughout the interview data. The research findings suggested that multiple criteria and factors were perceived to play roles in the composition of individual employability, though enjoying different degrees of importance. Although the validity of judging a person's employability by the educational credentials the person held was largely doubted, the interviewees could not deny the predominance of educational credentials in selecting and screening candidates, which to some extent decided one's life chances. In the context of higher education expansion and credential inflation, the 'reputational capital' of a credential, which signals a different educational experience from those increasingly available to the masses, became more significant as a means of maintaining positional advantage (Brown, 1995; Lowe, 2000), such as the elite university or overseas university degrees. In addition, the value and the role of educational degrees would decrease in terms of indicating or predicting one's employability, as one's other qualities improved.

A strong sense of 'credentialism' was reflected in the interviews (along with a relatively weak technocratic view). Both the student and working interviewees perceived educational credentials as their tickets for entry into the labour market competition. These tickets were not necessarily a guarantee of their places in employment; but without any degree or qualification, a person would not be qualified to enter the competition. This became crueler in the context of higher education expansion, because the availability of 'modern' jobs has failed to keep step with the increasing level of skilled human resources emerging from the education system. The employer and policy-maker interviewees also shared this view. They stated that the basic entry requirement for a job in their organizations would be at least a bachelor degree. Interestingly,

however, this account did not reflect the idea that the skills required in their organizations demanded people from higher educational institutions or with higher educational degrees. Rather, it was simply because there were too many university graduates out in the labour market to be sifted. In short, to the interviewees, both the student and working interviewees and the employer and policy-maker interviewees, education and training was seen as a process in which students were engaged in a ritualistic process of gathering certificates in order to find a job (but not to do a job) (Dore, 1976). The next point below suggests a potential reason for this view.

There was a strong sense in the interviews that educational qualifications were just papers, rather than representations of skill. The interviewees from all the three groups indicated that education, training and credentials could help the holder to get a job, but not necessarily to do the job. Real skills and knowledge would only be developed through their work experience. The intrinsic value of the educational experiences was ignored to a large extent. This was articulated to the nature and characteristics of Chinese education and training, particularly teaching and learning in higher education. To the interviewees, teaching and learning in the Chinese higher education institutions were characterized as theory-laden, rote learning and, out-of-date course content. As to the rapid changes taking place in the real world of work and the knowledge and skills required, the interviewees felt there was a gap between what they learned at university and what they needed to deal with at work. This view further strengthened their opinions on the ritualistic role of education and training in China and their doubt of the validity of credentials in terms of measuring people's employability.

In relation to this point, almost all the interviewees emphasized that work experience, compared with formal education and training, was more useful and more significant for developing people's real skills and knowledge; because people were confronted with real situations, problems and questions. Also, through this process, other soft skills would be improved, such as team-work and analytical skills. It was not difficult to sense that the working interviewees commonly felt confident of their competitive advantage over their student and graduate counterparts due to their relatively longer work experience and hence relatively more substantial skills, knowledge and abilities. In addition, they perceived their university degree to be more valuable than that of their

younger counterparts, as their degrees were obtained before the higher education expansion.

Reading further into the interviews, we could find there seemed to be a calculation or exchange among qualification and work experience.

Xingqi: *'Let me give you an example. There are two competitors: one with a bachelor degree and three years' working experience and the other with three years' master study experience. I think the former one has more advantage, because, maybe due to the different subject like accounting, it requires a great amount of practice, which is absolutely important. Some problems at work can not be solved by reading theories. Only confronting in real life, can we know and understand what to do and how to deal with it. ... From those theoretical studies, the only thing we can obtain is abstract concepts.'*

Jiawei: *'If I have a master degree but with only two or three years' working experience, compared to another competitor who only has a college degree but with seven years' working experience, I think we are equal to each other. We are standing at the same starting point (in the labour market competition). ... but the same example, but the other competitor is a bachelor degree holder, and then I think the competitor is stronger and more advantaged than me.'*

The initial impression from these two quotes might be that qualification and work experience could be exchangeable. However, it was not difficult to find that work experience was more emphasized in relation to developing one's 'real' skills, as work experience could offer the competitors more practice rather than mere abstract theory. The substantial skills and professional knowledge would be developed through the work; thus, a certain amount of practice and experience made the competitor stronger. Yet, at the same time, educational qualifications, in particular different degree levels, also played a role in screening the competitors. In other words, both educational qualifications and work experience would play a mutual or complementary role in increasing a competitor's life chance and assist him or her to gain a job.

Education and employment were demonstrated to be closely interconnected with each other in a Chinese society. In the labour allocation system before the socio-economic reform, a person would be assured of a job position, usually for life, once he or she graduated from university. There might have been competition in terms of the university entrance exam, but the extent of the competition for job allocation was relatively weak, as the university recruitment was generally based on the planned economy or economic demands. An educational credential, rather than education itself, was utilized as a life insurance and facilitator for individual and group prosperity and social mobility. After the socio-economic reform and higher education expansion, individuals were expected to be self-responsible for their social lives, including education and employment. Individuals invested heavily in their schooling as a way to develop and sustain their prosperity and as a way to elevate their social status. There was not only competition at the stage of the university entrance exam, but also more fierce competition in the labour market. This can be linked to our third point.

In the context of higher education expansion and credential inflation, to have a university degree is not enough to guarantee the holder getting a job. To compete against the others, individuals need to show the difference in the value of credentials. The different education experiences behind each qualification and the source of the qualifications, as reputational capital (Brown, 1995), become more significant as a means of obtaining positional advantage, to increase one's life chances. The positional advantage elements of educational credentials can be categorized as educational institutional reputation (top vs. non-top universities) and institutional location (domestic vs. overseas universities). Whereas, the differences between top and non-top universities in China were considered as peer study atmosphere (such as being hardworking) and teaching and learning resources, the perceived difference between domestic and overseas universities was mainly emphasized as developing different ways of thinking, developing some useful skills, such as language and interpersonal skills, and the quality of teaching. Again, the nature and characteristics of Chinese education were questioned from another indirect perspective, revealing the individuals' lack of confidence or trust of formal education in the Chinese education settings.

5.7 Summary

This data analysis chapter focuses on presenting and analyzing the research findings on the individual opinions on the labour market competition. The discussion is concerned with how the individuals constructed their employability and what role of education, training and qualifications play in this process. The findings suggested that individuals as knowledgeable agents reflected on the rapid socio-economic changes in the current society and were highly aware of a strong sense of self-responsibility to develop and manage their employability, so as to increase their life chances in the labour market. It was also found that employability was a multi-faceted notion, consisting of a series of ‘hard’ and ‘soft currencies’. For example, ‘hard currencies’ included education capital (the value of credentials was mainly acknowledged) and work experience (which can generate ‘real’ skill development and hence self-fulfillment). In addition, certain structural or policy factors to some extent played a role in deciding people’s standing in the competition, such as the *hukou* system. The ‘soft currencies’ were considered to be personal and interpersonal skills, to adjust and develop oneself in a changing social and economic context. A further read into the interviews led to the argument that different people, with different histories, social background and experience, possessing different social position and resources, had the ability to identify what their advantages and disadvantages (over others) were in line with their ‘frame of reference’, and accordingly designed their strategies to stand out in the labour market competition. This process can be seen as a reflexive project of ‘self’.

This research also aims at exploring people’s participation in the education and training programme STTP and their views on lifelong learning. Individuals’ engagement in learning can be considered as part of the process of constructing their employability. An analysis of individual stories on their participation in learning, specifically STTP in this research, can be helpful to understanding the reflexive project of making sense of self. Meanwhile, the individuals’ perceptions on the value of STTP and lifelong learning could be further brought into the discussion on the nature of education and training in the current Chinese context. These issues will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 Individuals' Participation in STTP and their Perceptions of Lifelong Learning

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on individuals' participation in STTP. The notion of learner identity and the framework of 'rational choice theory' will be utilized here to analyze individuals' engagement in STTP and lifelong learning as part of their employability construction. The analysis will start with a brief presentation of findings from the questionnaire fieldwork. This will be followed by the individuals' stories of attending or not attending the STTP education and training programme. A synthesis across the cases on the individuals' motivations and cost-benefit considerations on STTP and lifelong learning will then be presented.

6.2 The quantitative findings

6.2.1 Participation situation of the questionnaire respondents

The backgrounds of the questionnaire respondents were presented in section 5.2. In addition, it is important to note that, in terms of their participation, 245 respondents (87.8%) were taking or have only taken one course in STTP, while 34 respondents (12.2%) have taken two or more courses in STTP. Only 50 respondents (16.9%) have taken exams in STTP; however, a further 78.8% of the respondents showed their intention to sit the exams after finishing the course. Altogether, 68.2% of respondents expressed that they were most or fairly likely to attend more courses in STTP (with 21.5% most likely and 46.7% fairly likely), compared with 1.8% of them who showed no intention of doing so at all. Also, 24 of all the respondents (8.6%) have taken other education and training programme outside STTP.

6.2.2 The reasons for attending the STTP courses: findings from the questionnaire

Some possible reasons, identified from the literature, as listed in Table 6.2.2, were provided in the questionnaire. These possible reasons can be grouped into three main categories: employment-related (reasons 1-6), qualification-oriented (reasons 7-9) and learning experience (reasons 10-12). The data gathered shows that each individual was

motivated by a range of reasons when making the decision to take part in the STTP courses. 93.5% respondents chose more than one reason.

Table 6.2.2 The reasons for attending the STTP courses

The reasons	The student respondents N = 100		The working respondents N = 165		Total respondents N = 279 (with 14 missing data)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1. To get a job	69	69	106	64.2	184	65.9
2. To get a job in Shanghai	32	32	48	29.1	89	31.9
3. To change the work or the type of work I am doing	13	13	35	21.1	51	18.3
4. To gain promotion	26	26	76	46.1	108	38.7
5. To gain a rise in earnings	31	31	60	36.3	98	35.1
6. To obtain job satisfaction	46	46	104	63.0	157	56.3
7. To gain a recognized qualification	48	48	59	35.8	109	39.1
8. More and more people having taken part in STTP and gaining qualifications	16	16	23	13.9	39	14.0
9. To get an increasingly important qualification	34	34	59	35.8	95	34.1
10. To help me towards a future course of learning	22	22	37	22.4	64	22.9
11. To obtain learning experience	27	27	46	27.9	78	28.0
12. To enrich my leisure activities	24	24	12	7.3	73	26.2

The above table suggests that employment-related reasons were identified as one of the major determinants of STTP participation, compared with the other two sets of reasons. In contrast, the learning experience related reasons were not highly rated. It indicates

that the STTP learning to some extent was inspired by a strong sense of instrumental learning, rather than by the recognition of the intrinsic value of learning.

First, employment-related reasons were picked out as the most common motivations to participate in STTP. Looking through the questionnaire data, we find that only 9 respondents did not tick any of these reasons. Second, in terms of qualification-oriented motivations, 39.1% of respondents considered gaining a recognized qualification as part of their goal in taking the STTP courses; 34.1% agreed that STTP qualifications have become increasingly important in the labour market; however, only 14.0% declared that they took the course because more and more people were doing so. The data also shows that the respondents who were more likely to be motivated because of the qualification provided were students respondents (48%; chi-square, sig. 0.05) and those who were employed but looking for better jobs (43.3%; chi-square, sig. 0.01). There is a similar picture in relation to the other qualification-oriented reasons investigated in the questionnaire. In other words, it can be presumed that new labour market entrants with little work experience and those who are looking for a better job tended to be more driven by the attraction of the STTP qualifications.

Some of the respondents were partly inspired by the belief that studying on STTP would bring them different learning experiences, assist them for further study and enrich their leisure-time activities, but compared with the other reasons, these were less popular. However, the more work experience they had, the more they were likely driven to study by their interests.

The other reasons the respondents mentioned included that 17 working respondents were required by their companies to take part in the courses: these respondents were all from finance and banking, trading, logistics and computing. In addition, 'to get a STTP certificate with my existing knowledge' and 'to know more friends' were declared as reasons for participating.

6.2.3 The perceptions of lifelong learning

The respondents were asked to rate their opinions on certain statements identified from the literature on lifelong learning (rating scale 1-5, as strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree and strongly agree).

-- The importance of lifelong learning

In total, 83.8% of the respondents rated positively the statement that ‘it is important to recognize the importance of lifelong learning’ (see table 6.2.3a).

Table 6.2.3a People need to realize the importance of lifelong learning.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	2	.7	Mean 4.09
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	10	3.6	SD 0.786
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	33	11.8	Percentile 25 4
<i>Agree (4)</i>	151	54.1	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	83	29.7	75 5
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

-- The perceived reasons for engaging with lifelong learning

Three main reasons for engaging with lifelong learning were identified during the questionnaire design. The respondents were asked about their opinion on these three factors which make lifelong learning of great importance: fierce competition in the labour market, the rapid development of knowledge and technology, and ‘learning is valuable for its own sake, not just about jobs’. Generally speaking, the respondents gave tended to give positive responses to all three (see Table 6.2.3b, 6.2.3c and 6.2.3d)

Table 6.2.3b Fierce competition in the labour market makes lifelong learning of great importance.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	0	0	Mean 3.94
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	18	6.5	SD 0.768
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	37	13.3	Percentile 25 4
<i>Agree (4)</i>	168	60.2	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	56	20.1	75 4
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.3c The rapid-developing knowledge and technology makes lifelong learning of great importance.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	0	0	Mean 4.12
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	6	2.2	SD 0.692
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	34	12.2	Percentile 25 4
<i>Agree (4)</i>	160	56.3	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	79	28.3	75 5
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.3d Lifelong learning is valuable for its own sake, not just about jobs.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	2	0.7	Mean 3.97
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	20	6.2	SD 0.867
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	36	12.9	Percentile 25 4
<i>Agree (4)</i>	146	52.3	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	75	26.9	75 5
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

-- Perceptions of the STTP courses

The data from the questionnaire also revealed the perceived advantages of the STTP programme (see Table 6.2.3e). 63.4% of the respondents valued ‘high social recognition’ as one of its advantages; and 54.5% of the respondents valued its work-related course content as an advantage. It is interesting to note that the student respondents (40 out of 100 students) tended to be more attracted by the work-related course content (Chi-squared, sig. 0.01). The other possible advantages proposed in the questionnaire were prompt updating of course content (29.4%), flexible learning and assessment system (28%), high-quality teaching (16.6%), affordable tuition fee (9%). At the same time, the majority of respondents (68.5%) considered the STTP course and its qualification equivalent to vocational certificates, rather than higher education degrees.

Table 6.2.3e The perceived advantages and attractions of the STTP courses

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>High social recognition</i>	177	63.4%
<i>Work related course content</i>	152	54.5%
<i>Course content renewed over time</i>	82	29.4%
<i>High-quality teaching resources</i>	49	17.6%
<i>Flexible learning and assessment system</i>	78	28%
<i>Training duration</i>	79	28.1%
<i>Affordable training tuition</i>	25	9%
<i>The relevant value: vocational education degree</i>	187	68.5%

Related to other issues, such as higher education expansion and the Shanghai labour market features, the respondents were asked to rate their opinion on the reasons why STTP was popular (see Tables 6.2.3f, 6.2.3g, 6.2.3h, 6.2.3i, 6.2.3j, 6.2.3k, 6.2.3l). Most of the respondents positively agreed that higher education expansion had led to the devaluation of university degrees (80.6%). In turn, it might make people seek

alternative or new degrees and qualifications to prove their abilities and skills (82.4%). Meanwhile, the respondents also agreed that more and more talented people came to Shanghai to develop their career, which made the competition in the Shanghai labour market more fierce (89.2%). But it is interesting to note that only a little over half of the respondents thought localized education and training qualifications would protect their holders in such competition (53.5%). Also, only about half of the respondents thought positively that the STTP programme would play a role in promoting the development of lifelong learning and a learning society (52.7%); and thought that the STTP qualification could be more attractive to its participants than its course content (51.3%). Less than half of the respondents predicted that the localized education and training programme STTP and its qualification would become people's first choice as a supplement to full-time education (46.4%).

Table 6.2.3f Because of the expansion of higher education, the value of the university degree is reduced.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	4	1.4	Mean 3.91
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	34	12.2	SD 0.961
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	16	5.7	Percentile 25 4
<i>Agree (4)</i>	154	55.2	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	71	25.4	75 5
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.3g Because so many people now have higher education credentials, people need new alternative qualifications to show their ability in the labour market.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	3	1.1	Mean 3.95
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	19	6.8	SD 0.823
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	27	9.7	Percentile 25 4
<i>Agree (4)</i>	171	61.3	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	59	21.1	75 4
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.3h Shanghai citizen are facing more challenges and competitions from people from other parts of the country.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	3	1.1	Mean 4.20
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	6	2.2	SD 0.756
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	21	6.5	Percentile 25 4
<i>Agree (4)</i>	151	54.1	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	98	35.1	75 4
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.3i Localized qualifications, such as STTP, will provide Shanghai citizens with special protection and privilege to compete in the labour market.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	4	1.4	Mean 3.52
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	26	9.3	SD 0.860
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	100	35.8	Percentile 25 3
<i>Agree (4)</i>	119	42.7	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	30	10.8	75 4
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.3j STTP inspires people to realize that learning is something people do and will benefit from throughout their life.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	3	1.1	Mean 3.46
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	44	15.8	SD 0.928
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	85	30.5	Percentile 25 3
<i>Agree (4)</i>	115	41.2	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	32	11.5	75 4
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.3k In STTP, the qualification, rather than the content, is the attraction to the participants.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	5	1.8	Mean 3.36
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	72	25.8	SD 1.066
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	59	21.1	Percentile 25 3
<i>Agree (4)</i>	104	36.3	50 4
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	39	14.0	75 4
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

Table 6.2.31 The localized qualifications will become the first choice as a supplement to full-time education, if people hope to enter the Shanghai labour market.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
<i>Disagree strongly (value 1)</i>	6	2.2	Mean 3.40
<i>Disagree (2)</i>	27	9.7	SD 0.833
<i>Not sure (3)</i>	114	40.9	Percentile 25 3
<i>Agree (4)</i>	114	40.9	50 3
<i>Agree strongly (5)</i>	18	6.5	75 4
<i>Total</i>	279	100.0	

6.2.4 A brief summary of the quantitative findings

The quantitative findings offer a general picture of the respondents' experience in the STTP and their perception on the value of lifelong learning. It suggests that the individuals' engagement with STTP was motivated by multiple factors and reasons, such as for seeking employment, for changing occupation or getting promoted at work, for self-fulfilment. While the employment-related reasons largely dominated, the respondents also showed their awareness on the value of learning and their consciousness of the fierce labour market and social changes taking places in Shanghai. Although the quantitative data to some extent illustrates the impact of social structural factors on individual learning, it did not explain how individuals actually experienced their lives and learning and how learning impacted or changed their lives. Thus, an understanding of the individual experience and learning stories will assist us to understand what the STTP experience means to learners in the changing society.

6.3 Individual stories of participating in STTP and lifelong learning

Interviewees were asked about their experience of participation or non-participation in STTP. The interview placed particular emphasis on uncovering respondents' motivations for or against participation and the extent to which decision-making involved some 'cost-benefit' analysis. Decision-making in attending or not attending the STTP programme can be seen as a story of the learners' learning experience. Rather than focusing on the whole learning experience, this research had an interest in the role of learning in STTP in terms of constructing one's employability in the labour market competition in Shanghai. This does not mean, however, that other learning experience or other social and personal factors were excluded. Rather, other factors were taken into

consideration in analysing these personal stories. In this section, the individual learning stories in STTP will be presented.

The respondents' stories are presented in two groups: participants and non-participants in STTP. Within these two broad groups, a further distinction can be made between students and workers. Two unusual cases are two participants who are also employers.

6.3.1 The student participants' stories

-- Tangyue's decision-making in STTP

Tangyue, who was about to graduate from a non-top university, attended the interpretation courses in STTP, both intermediate level and advanced level. She passed the intermediate level exams and obtained the certificate. She passed the written exam at the advanced level, and was waiting for the results for the oral exam. At the same time, she also took some sub-degree courses¹⁶ in finance in her university study.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the courses

Tangyue took the courses in the summer holidays, as she firstly thought it was wiser to make use of holiday time to study something, rather than staying at home and wasting time. Apart from this, she identified another four reasons. First, she aimed at improving her English language skills through attending 'intensive' courses¹⁷, especially in speaking and vocabulary. The second reason was '*that quite a lot of people study this course as well, so I went to study*'. Tangyue found she might be left behind if she did not participate in this course, as her peer classmates actively took part in it. Also, Tangyue thought the certificates from the interpretation courses would bring her extra advantages and help her to find a better job; as most of the job positions in the finance sector require proficiency in English. In addition, as the STTP courses were designed for and in Shanghai, she believed that if she planned to develop her career in Shanghai, it would be useful and valuable to achieve the certificates. Fourth, she hoped, through interaction with other learners, to change her 'quiet/introvert' character to be more open and active in the current society in the process of taking the course. After talking about

¹⁶ Sub-degree courses mean that students are allowed to sit in other universities' courses, and can obtain a certificate to prove his or her attendance and exams success. Usually, students will use this chance to take some courses in subjects different from their original major.

¹⁷ During summer holiday time, certain institutions will provide intensive courses, such as on interpretation course. Original half-year course will be condensed into two months' duration. Students need to sit in the class four days a week, from morning to afternoon.

her experience of taking the course, Tangyue emphasized that to improve her English language skills and obtaining the certificate played on equal part in her decision-making.

In relation to her decision-making process, Tangyue actually strategically planned the timing of taking the training courses. She took the intermediate interpretation course in her first summer holiday in the university, and took the assessment and obtained the certificate in her second year. She then took the advanced course training in the second summer holiday and passed the written exam in her third year. The factors that Tangyue took into consideration to plan her learning in STTP were 1) when she needed the certificate, and 2) when she would start to find a job. *'If I fail the exam in the third year at university, I still have one year to make it up and to re-sit the exam. If I can pass, I will still be able to use it [the certificate] in my job seeking.'*

From a cost-benefit perspective, Tangyue believed firmly that she would gain something from any education and training, including STTP, as long as she worked hard. Her father had strongly influenced her in this regard.

'In fact, since I was a little girl, my father always told me that I can save money from aspects other than study. Maybe someone will borrow certain learning materials if he is going to use for only once. This is economical and practical. But my father will give me the money to buy every learning material I need. Gradually, a habit is formed that I will pay whatever I can on study investment. I think, as long as I make my effort, I will achieve reward eventually. Even though I may fail in the first time, I will succeed if I keep trying the second time, the third time....'

This quote shows that Tangyue's decision-making in STTP was not a strict economic accountancy exercise. The direct learning cost was taken into consideration. However, the value and return to learning was not necessarily instrumental to her. She was not clear or did not think about what the exact benefits of success would be, but the belief in or her consideration of future reward was shown.

Tangyue found that her university course involved a large amount of English major course and training, which equipped her with a solid knowledge base of English language. This relatively strong knowledge base in turn enabled her to gain more

benefits or more improvement from STTP than people from other subjects, and made it relatively easier for her to pass the exam and obtain the certificate. Students from other subject students might spend more effort to master the skills and to pass the exams due to their relatively weaker English knowledge. This led Tangyue to thinking '*science students may not have the same profit return as we [English major students] do*'. Tangyue's accounts of the measurement of marginal benefits to English and non-English major students implicitly reflects that she considered obtaining qualification as her ultimate goal rather than improving her language skills.

Views and experience on lifelong learning in general

Tangyue had heard of 'lifelong learning'. Work meant lifelong learning to her. She would continue to learn after she started working, because to her '*lifelong learning is to update and improve one's skills and knowledge. In the current world, if you do not make progress to learn and stay at where you were, you will certainly end up with being eliminated*'. From the context here, Tangyue did not mean the job position, but a wider sense of human improvement. She was also heavily influenced by her parents who were teachers and continued to learn new knowledge and skills all the time, according to Tangyue.

Tangyue's comment on the value of STTP and its qualifications

In general, Tangyue commented positively on the STTP courses, as she reiterated that all kinds of learning were good to individuals. Her experience in the sub-degree course was recounted and compared to that of STTP. Tangyue had a great interest in accounting and took part in the sub-degree course in Fudan University, an elite university. The sub-degree course lasted two years, three times a week during term time. To her, participation in this sub-degree course was more about testing her consistency and perseverance. It also took a while before she could judge her performance and progress in this course. Tangyue felt that the experience of both courses was useful in terms of skill improvement. It is also interesting to note that she talked about the effect of the two certificates in her job seeking. In her opinion, both certificates played a role in helping her, but the extent of their usefulness depended on the job content. '*When I had my interview in the Bank of China, the manager made a positive comment on my sub-degree course certificate. He thought it was related to the job. When he saw my interpretation course certificate, he just said 'good good'.*'

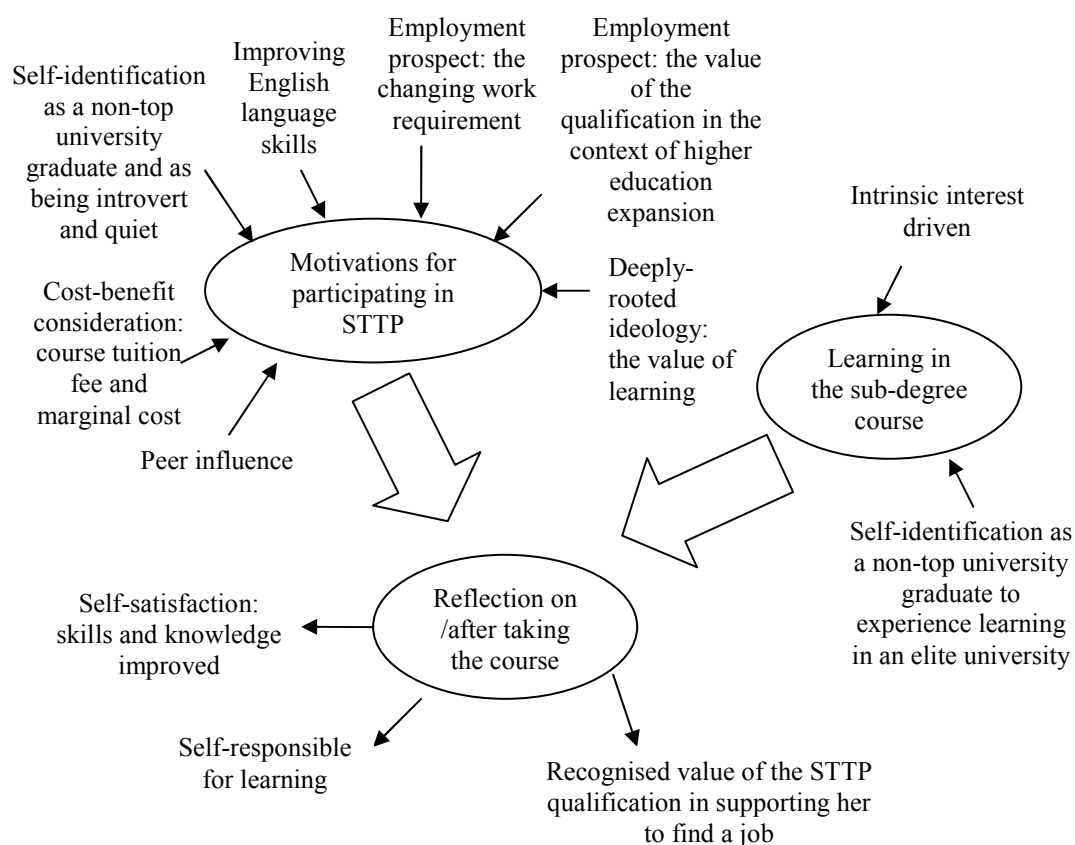
At the end of the interview, Tangyue mentioned that the fact that higher education expansion led to degree inflation motivated her to study in both STTP courses and the sub-degree courses. However, she insisted that her main motivation was still on improving herself. *'If a person improves his knowledge and skill in the process of achieving the certificate, it means he has succeeded; however, if apart from qualifications, his knowledge and skills are not improved at all, then all those credentials mean nothing.'* While recognising the job market value of the certificate, Tangyue seemed to focus on self-development as an indicator of 'success'.

Overall comment on Tangyue's interview

Tangyue's aspirations for attending STTP were based on a mix of instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. These reasons were tied up with the negotiation between herself and the social settings in which she was located. Tangyue was highly aware that it was an individual's responsibility to manage and construct employability in the current competitive society. Her learning motivations were mediated by her employment aspirations, specifically, what sort of job she was going to seek, what sort of skills she needed for the job and what qualifications were required. Here, Tangyue's self-consciousness as a non-top university graduate increased her determination to obtain extra certificates, so as to make up for the potentially restricted employment opportunity that she feels accompanies this status. She made her choice of the STTP interpretation course on the basis of the content delivered, as well as under the influence of her family and peer students. In addition, her decision-making process was supported by her strong belief in the undoubted value of education and training in personal success, which as discussed above, is too complex to be interpreted in simple instrumental terms. From the perspective of a strong version rational choice theory, Tangyue did not make her choice on the principle of maximising profit. This again was related to her deep-rooted cultural ideology of 'learning is always good'. Hence, being hardworking and making great effort to learn was reiterated by Tangyue to be an ontologically secured strategy to personal success. Her strategic learning plan was also displayed by her time arrangement. Through her limited direct experience in the labour market, she found the value of the qualification was recognized by the employer, which led to her positive comment on STTP, and further consolidated her belief that extra learning would assist

in building her employability and in turn expanding her opportunities in the labour market. Figure 6.3.1a presents the factors influencing Tangyue's learning experience.

Figure 6.3.1a Tangyue's learning story in STTP



-- Xiaomei's decision-making in STTP

Xiaomei, a year three university student, studied in a top university. At the time of the interview, she had attended both intermediate and advanced interpretation courses in STTP. She obtained the intermediate-level interpretation certificate successfully but unfortunately failed in the advanced course assessment. At the time of taking the course, Xiaomei actually did not realize that the courses were run by the government and were part of the government's so-called 'training for skill in shortage' strategy. Only recently had she learned the interpretation courses were part of this programme. Looking at the name, Xiaomei commented that she supposed that the government wished to develop its human resource and skilled workers for the city development by providing those intensive courses. As Xiaomei was thinking of studying abroad after university, she currently needed to sit the GRE test and thus was taking the GRE course.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the courses

Xiaomei took the interpretation courses mainly for three reasons. Firstly, the public popularity of the course attracted her; however, she also emphasized that if she were to consider attending an education and training programme in the future, she would make her decision based on her skill and knowledge demands, rather than simply joining a bandwagon. On the one hand, Xiaomei thought that the popularity of the programme hinted at its worthiness. But on the other hand, she was also concerned that the more people attended the course and obtained the certificates, the less valuable the certificates would become. In the following excerpt, she clearly recognized the positional good nature of STTP certificates.

‘STTP is for cultivating talent in shortage, just like its name. Only a few people knew about the programme and only a few people took the assessment, when it just started. So its value was really high. But, up to now, it has been developing for several years. The number of courses increases and the number of its participants increases too. Gradually, I think its value has become not as high as before. I think the value of a qualification is tightly related to the number of its holders. If so many people have the certificates, the value is not that high.’

Secondly, she would like to improve her English language skills through the course. As a physics major student, Xiaomei identified her interest in the English language and realized that her job aspiration would be teaching physics in a bilingual setting. In a broader interpretation, this learning motivation can be viewed as more than purely instrumental. The third reason was Xiaomei’s realization of the need to obtain a higher certificate, apart from her CET (College English Test) 6 certificate¹⁸. As more people have come to hold a CET 6 certificate, Xiaomei thought the value of CET 6 certificates was decreasing and found herself losing her advantage compared to others. In this case, she perceived it necessary to achieve a higher credential to help her to secure her position ahead of others. Compared with her second learning motivation, this is a narrow sense of instrumentality in the centre of positional competition. Talking about

¹⁸ CET is an English test for university students. English is a compulsory subject in university studies in China. It includes two different levels: band 4 and band 6. Usually, students from science subjects will take the band 4 certificate as one of the requirements to obtain their bachelor degree; while band 6 certificates are for arts students. CET certificate is a kind of tool to measure students’ English level. However, it is also noteworthy that CET certificates have become relatively common among university graduates and students.

her experience in the STTP exam, she conveyed that she would like the assessment to give her a true measure of the skills and knowledge she had learned from the course; however, she did also evaluate whether the market value of the qualification would be high. Xiaomei had also observed her peer learners and felt that people mainly studied in STTP for two reasons the same as herself: to improve their skills and knowledge and to obtain the qualifications.

In terms of the cost consideration, Xiaomei thought that the tuition fee for the interpretation course was affordable to her. Meanwhile, she noticed that the tuition fee for certain education and training programme in '*the education market*' was '*absolutely high*', which prevented her from taking them. She believed that taking courses was not the only way to improve skills. As with Tangyue, this learning calculation did not involve an explicit calculation of benefit and comparison with cost.

Views and experience on lifelong learning in general

When asked about her views on lifelong learning, Xiaomei was unfamiliar with the term. But, on being shown the Chinese characters, she guessed this notion might mean 'live and learn'.

The value of STTP and its qualifications

In general, Xiaomei commented favourably on STTP, as she had found herself gaining new knowledge and improving her English language skills. Despite the fact that she failed in the advanced course assessment, she still found the learning experience of the course had been a self-awareness process; it had enabled her to identify what her advantages and disadvantages were, what skills and knowledge she was lacking, and what she wanted to learn. Meanwhile, Xiaomei was also aware of the value of the interpretation certificates in terms of employment requirements. If she planned to seek a job in Shanghai, she would try again to obtain the advanced level certificate, because the advanced-level certificate would give her extra credit in the employment competition.

Comparing her experience in the STTP interpretation course and that of the GRE course, she found that the interpretation course was more skill-oriented while the GRE course was so 'instrumental' ('*gong li*'). The GRE courses only taught her how to cope with

the GRE test rather than developing actual skills and knowledge to deal with real world situation. This reinforced her positive perceptions of the interpretation course.

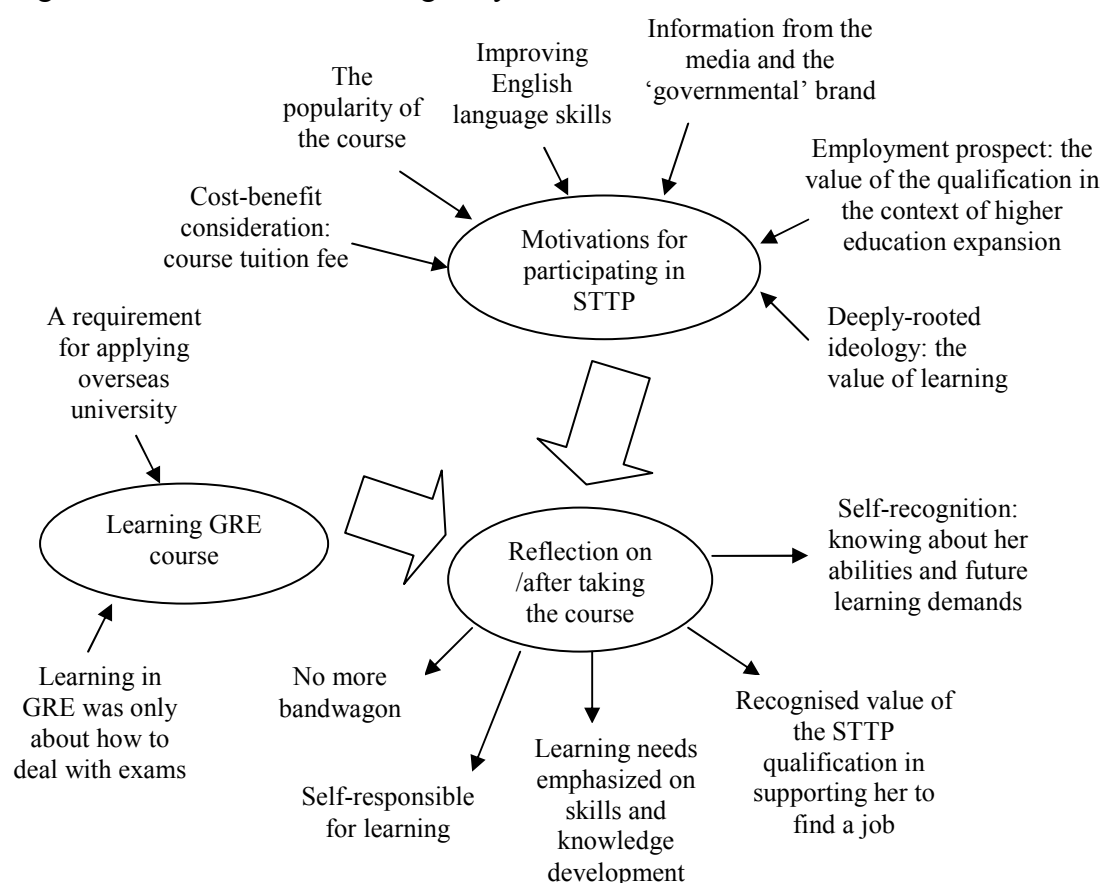
Xiaomei repeatedly mentioned the skills and knowledge she gained, but at the same time, she was aware of the labour market value of the STTP certificate itself. In her opinion, the value of the STTP certificates came from their being organized by the government. This 'government' made branding made their quality 'sound' reliable. However, Xiaomei noticed that due to the growing number of STTP certificate holders, the certificates could be become devalued in the employment market, as with any certificates. Related to this point, Xiaomei expanded on her view of the marketized education and training situation in Shanghai. She found there were too many programmes to choose from but with no governmental guidance to assist in the decision making. On the other side of the educational market, individual learners realized the importance of being involved in learning rather than being eliminated, but without information provided by authorities, they could only base their learning decisions on the popularity of the course. At the end of the interview, Xiaomei concluded that STTP could be taken as part of lifelong learning. But rather, she thought the 'University for the Third Age' was the real lifelong learning, as this attracted people through their intrinsic interests in learning, rather than for instrumental reasons of employment and work.

Overall comment on Xiaomei's interview

Xiaomei's participation in the interpretation course was different from Tangyue's experience. Her decision to participate was firstly driven by the public popularity. Nevertheless, a strong belief in skill development and the value of the qualification to increase her competitiveness was embedded in her mind. Although she had limited information on the programme, the learning cost was taken into consideration, but in an absolute sense of whether she could afford it, rather than relative to the expected financial benefits. Her learning experience in both the interpretation course and the GRE training helped her to change her attitude towards education and training. She reflected that in future she would not attend learning purely based on its popularity. This reflection also occurred in the context of education and training marketization. Xiaomei was highly aware of the macro-outcome that there were too many educational commodities to choose from. As an individual actor, she felt uncertain about making

decisions and found that learning decisions needed to be made on the basis of individual skills and knowledge needs, interpreted as either intrinsically or extrinsically driven needs. Xiaomei's learning experience in the interpretation course also assisted her in recognising her current skill level, which oriented her further thoughts on future learning plan. As a year three student, Xiaomei's information about the labour market competition came mainly from her senior colleagues at university or from the media. With these information resources, Xiaomei summarized and identified the important elements for her to gain advantage in the labour market competition. Due to her lack of direct experience in the labour market, she talked little about how she would utilize the STTP qualification to gain employment. However, a pre-existing idea was revealed in the interview that extra credentials, such as those of STTP, would help her or secure her position; but only if a minority of people held those positional goods. (See figure 6.3.1b)

Figure 6.3.1b Xiaomei's learning story in STTP



-- Yijin's decision-making in STTP

Yijin, an electronic engineering graduate from an elite university in Shanghai, attended the intermediate level interpretation course in STTP in his second year at university, then took the exam and obtained the certificate in his third year. He was about to start working in a world-leading foreign IT computing company, doing research and development related work. He declared little intention to attend more STTP training or other outside-work training, as the company had already been providing a variety of work-related training.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the courses

Mainly, there were two reasons for Yijin, a science major student, to be involved in this training. Firstly, in his opinion, to develop his English language skills was the most important reason, as he found that almost all the good jobs in the field of electronic engineering were in foreign companies, and the interviews in those companies would be conducted in English. So for him, a science student, it would be very important to improve his English. (It was also interesting to note that throughout the interview Yijin did not mention the actual use of English language in his daily work except to point out that he did not actually need it to carry out his work). Secondly, Yijin thought an extra certificate from STTP could enhance his CV for employment. To get as many certificates as possible would be a solid foundation to finding a good job, especially in the circumstance of higher education expansion. He recognized that the value of university degrees decreased as the number of university degree holders increased. In this situation, the possession of extra certificates becomes significant, as indicators of the holder's capacity for study and further effort. In Yijin's opinion, the more qualifications one held, the more life chances would be generated for him or her; *but only to those newly graduated*. One's 'real' skills and abilities would be tested and shown at work as time went on.

Talking about his choice to join the STTP interpretation course, Yijin admitted that while he was thinking of improving his language skills, he did not have any particular course in mind to take. He noticed, however, that the interpretation course in STTP was very popular. Before making the decision to take the course, he searched for and asked his friends about relevant information on it. Yijin also searched and evaluated the course content and the skill and knowledge level delivered in this interpretation course, to

judge whether it met his own learning demands. He found more professional translation skills were delivered in the advanced interpretation course, which was specially designed for those who were English majors or those who might make interpretation a career. Meanwhile, content in the intermediate level course focused on economic development in Shanghai and relatively basic translation and interpretation skills. To Yijin, these skills, including certain English vocabulary, would certainly be useful in his future work, so he selected the intermediate level, rather than advanced level course. Commenting on this process, Yijin described himself as quite an instrumental learner in STTP.

Also, like Tangyue, Yijin adopted a strategic timing plan to take the course. Yijin took the course in his second year at university, because in that case he could sit the exam in his third year, which would give him sufficient time to get the certificate and use it in his job seeking.

Views and experience on lifelong learning in general

Yijin had heard of the notion of lifelong learning. To him, lifelong learning meant independent, self-managed learning across one's lifetime. *'In my opinion, 60-80% of education should be carried out by ourselves. Self-learning has occupied a large part of my learning. As to the parts taught by others... I mean, we can be instructed to learn. ... [but] we need to depend on ourselves.'* In relation to the rapidly changing technological development, especially in the IT industry, Yijin realized that it was necessary to keep learning and updating all the new skills and knowledge. At the same time, he also identified his job as research and development related, which required prompt learning. Otherwise, *'with only old or out-of-date knowledge, one will definitely be eliminated from the job or the competition.'*

Yijin's comment on the value of STTP and its qualifications

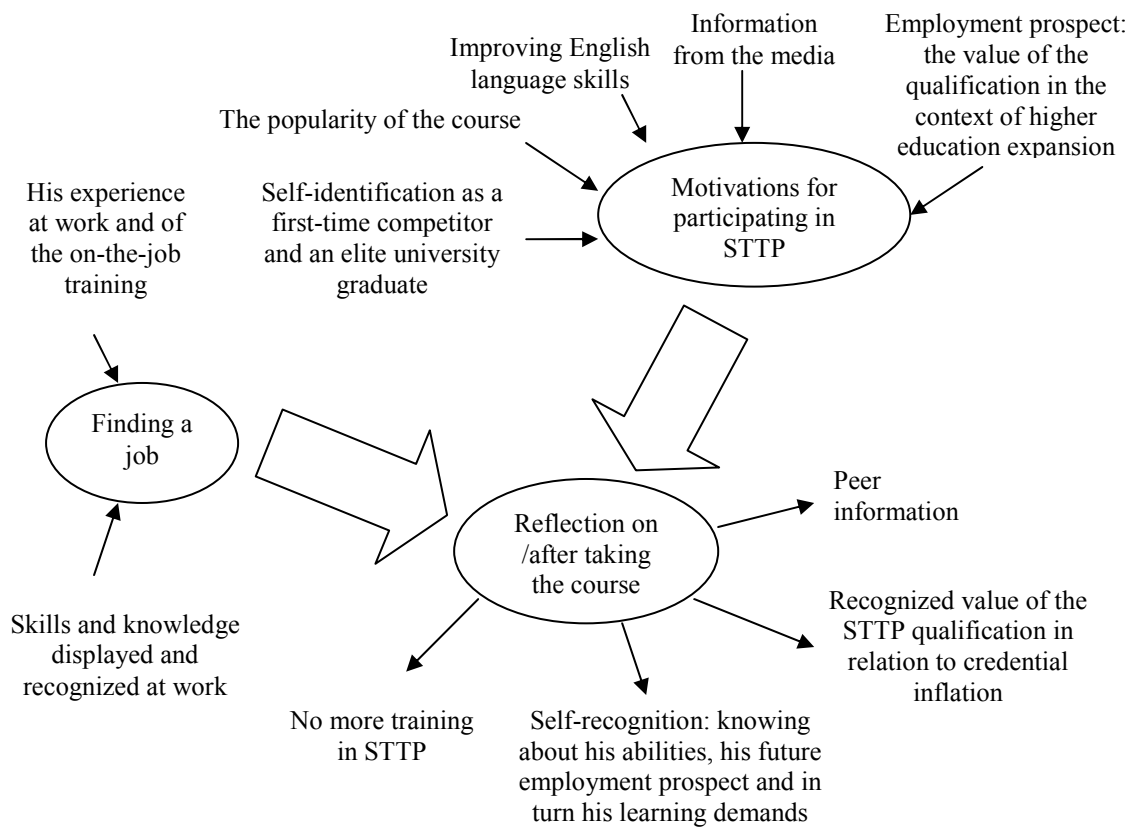
Yijin had a rather mixed view on the value of STTP. In terms of the interpretation course, he was aware that as an increasing number of people took the interpretation course and gained its certificates, the qualification devalued. However, there were other courses which were relatively newly designed to provide the skills in demand in the labour market. Referring to his friend's experience, Yijin thought the relatively new course still enjoyed higher quality and value. One of his friends obtained a certificate

from the STTP exposition management course; in one careers fair, the certificate was highly valued by two different employers. In addition, Yijin valued STTP as a form of lifelong learning. In an echo of the position expressed by Tangyue, Yijin declared that as long as the learner could improve his or her skills and knowledge, learning was valuable.

Overall comment on Yijin's interview

Yijin's participation in STTP was largely work-related in nature. He had a clear goal of what he would like to achieve through taking the STTP interpretation course, i.e. for the purpose of both skills and qualifications. When Yijin talked about his learning in STTP, he explicitly expressed his awareness of the social construction of personal employability. Reflecting on his direct experience in the labour market competition and information from his peers, he firmly believed that his employability mainly consisted of skills and knowledge, internship experience and, last but not the least important to a labour market entrant, a variety of credentials, such as university degrees and extra certificates. Hence, skill improvement was repeatedly talked about throughout the interview related to his participation in STTP. Second, identifying himself as a first-time competitor in the labour market, he explicitly declared that his learning was driven by a desire to obtain extra certificates. This, he stated, supported his employability construction, despite recognising the advantage that his elite university degree and learning experience had brought him. This credentialist view could not be clearly separated from his emphasis on skill development. Also, Yijin reiterated that developing skills was the most important goal in lifelong learning or any kind of education and learning. However, there was a strong credentialist view embedded in Yijin's viewpoints; that is, STTP and its qualifications were taken for their value as positional goods. As the number of STTP certificate holders in certain fields increased, the relative value of the certificates decreased. (See Figure 6.3.1c)

Figure 6.3.1c Yijin's learning story in STTP



-- Shushu's decision-making in STTP

Shushu took the advanced interpretation course in her third year at university. She also sat the exam and obtained the certificate. Course fees were paid by her parents.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

Compared with the previous interviewees' experience, Shushu's participation in STTP was quite different. As an English major student, English tests, such as CET 4 or 6, were not a compulsory requisite for her during her university studies. Her mother was aware of this fact and consulted her friend who was a university lecturer in a top university in Shanghai. This friend suggested Shushu should take the advanced interpretation course. According to Shushu, she was '*forced to learn*' by her mum and did not know anything about the course before taking it. After finishing the course, Shushu thought '*as I have already sat the course, I may as well take the exam*'. Only after finishing the course and obtaining the certificate, did Shushu find that the

interpretation course and its qualifications were so popular and in high demand in the labour market. Also, she discovered most of the lecturers in her university recommended students to do this course.

When asked if she planned her participation in STTP, she gave a negative answer. But, she found that some of her university friends did strategic planning in terms of the timing to take the course. *'Most of the students take this course in their late third year and try to achieve the qualifications early in the fourth year. And then, they can utilize the certificate in their job hunting.'*

Views and experience on lifelong learning in general

Shushu had heard of the notion of lifelong learning before. To her, lifelong learning should last a lifetime, and individuals took on the learning according to their needs. Furthermore, she maintained that, although lifelong learning could include all kinds of learning, lifelong learning should be more interest oriented, such as the University for the Third Age. Also, as individuals grew up, their demands and interests might change and their learning activities should reflect this.

Shushu's comment on the value of STTP and its qualifications

At first, Shushu denied that STTP could be considered as part of lifelong learning, as *'people tend to take the course for instrumental reasons'*. In her opinion, STTP could only be viewed as vocational learning. However, later on, in a discussion on her views on lifelong learning, she changed her mind since *'it is difficult to deny part of its value as lifelong learning'*.

In terms of the value of STTP, again, Shushu held a negative view. From Shushu's point of view, the value of STTP mainly came from its name as 'government designed' and its focus on 'talents in shortage'. Any education and training programme instigated by government reflected the authority that people generally ascribed to government. Shushu also suspected that the government was using its authority role to advertise and market the course. Attracted people's attention, the name 'talents in shortage' was interpreted by the participants as 'different' and offering 'value'. Shushu also mentioned *'the STTP qualifications play the role of adding extra value to one's employability just*

as a top university degree does to its holder. However, it is the view in society; and I do not believe it at all'. The reason for this was

'In fact, people who have experienced the interpretation exams all know that the exams are mainly based on the book edited by the professors from the Shanghai Foreign Studies University. The questions in both the written and the oral exams stem from this book. Almost the same! As long as you can remember the answers from the book, everyone can pass them. That is why I did not value this certificate so much. ... But after a few months, if you go to ask those people if they still remember what they learned, seldom will people remember.'

Interestingly, in spite of these negative comments on STTP, Shushu had to admit that as an aid to survival in a competitive society, STTP and its qualifications had its value as an indicator of desirable work habits and attitudes. *'If all bachelor degree holders go to a job interview, I think those with extra certificates, like the STTP certificates, will have an advantage. People will have a good impression of you. It does not mean a STTP certificate could win a person a position. However, without it, the person will be a loser.'*

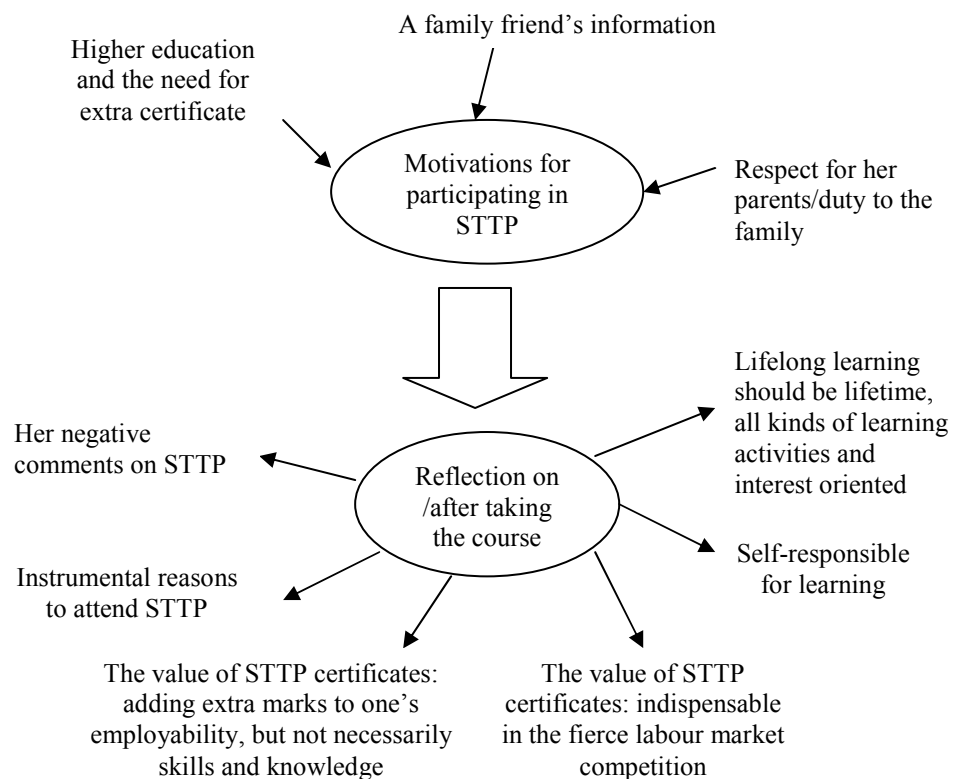
Another reason why Shushu thought the STTP course was narrowly instrumental was the 'business-like' organization and management of the course, which she commented on negatively. Shushu gave an example that within one university, different departments ran and organized evening courses of STTP separately which were open to the public. A high tuition fee was charged, and many advertisements were disseminated in newspapers. Shushu also found that when people applied for the exam they were asked to pay for every single step in the application, like registering for the exam, the exam fee, and even when people pass the exam, they were asked for money to receive the certificate. All these made the programme *'just like a business'*.

Overall comment on Shushu's interview

From the instrumental perspective of rational choice theory, Shushu's participation in the STTP interpretation course could be argued to be irrational. Shushu's mother might have engaged in some form of rational choice theory. However, from Shushu's viewpoint, she might have participated in the learning for the sake of obedience to her

parents and being a good daughter in a Chinese context. Her learning was firstly advised by one family friend and was influenced and then was decided by her mother, while she herself had no idea about it or plan to take it. No financial cost or other calculation was taken into consideration by Shushu. Through her observations, her university teachers' recommendation and the experience of her peers in the labour market, Shushu found that in spite of her personal negative comments on the quality of the STTP course and its qualification, the structural force of higher education expansion increased its social recognition in the labour market, as a way to add extra points to its holders' employability. In other words, Shushu's learning in STTP could be argued to be an unintended benefit (though intended by her mother) to develop her employability. Reflecting on her learning experience in STTP, she thought that lifelong learning should be a lifetime activity and intrinsic interest oriented. In sum, Shushu's case showed us that rationality is culturally-related, rather than what a strong version rational choice theory has suggested. (See Figure 6.3.1d)

Figure 6.3.1d Shushu's learning story in STTP



-- Heping's decision-making in STTP

Heping did his interpretation course during his postgraduate study, but did not sit the exam. He had heard about some other courses in STTP, but did not know a lot about the STTP project.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

Heping was motivated by '*one and a half reasons*' to attend the interpretation course. The '*one*' reason was to improve and develop his English language and interpretation skills through '*a short period of an intensive course*'; and the '*half*' reason was that he thought it would always be good to obtain an extra certificate as a '*job-seeking passport*'. He very deliberately emphasized, however, that skill improvement was the main drive for him to take part in the course. Due to some personal reasons, Heping missed the opportunity to take the exam at the end of learning. However, he expressed no regret, as through the course he had gained some skills and knowledge about interpretation.

In terms of cost-benefit considerations, Heping took financial cost and time-effort into consideration. The financial cost was seen as mainly the tuition fee. Heping thought the tuition fee and the fees for learning materials were relatively affordable. Yet, he held the view it would have been better to have learned by himself rather than in a class with others. As to the consideration of time and effort, Heping explained that his major, in both his first degree and his master degree, was English language related. In other words, he did not need to learn the interpretation course from scratch. Someone from another totally different major would have had to spend more time in mastering all the knowledge and skills. In his opinion, he himself, therefore, had less '*opportunity cost*' to bear.

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Heping had heard of the notion of lifelong learning. In his opinion, all kinds of education and training could be called lifelong learning, such as self-learning, taught courses, etc. But at the end of the interview, he reiterated that '*real*' lifelong learning should be driven by intrinsic interests or a hobby. Learning should not be limited or oriented by pressure such as seeking jobs or passing a certain education level. '*Learning*

should not be for the purpose of credentials, promotions or employment; but should be for its own sake.'

Talking about other education and training experiences, Heping mentioned a short-term programme on globalization and the global economy organized between the university where he studied as a postgraduate and another university in Germany. This short-term course did not offer any certificate. However, Heping found that, through a four-week block of intensive training, he completed two short essays and one long project with his colleagues. It was a valuable chance for him to develop not only his professional skills but also his interpersonal skills, even without obtaining a certificate. Here, Heping again emphasized that learning should be related to skill development.

Heping's comments on STTP and its qualifications

Heping mentioned that STTP was often compared to '*platinum certificates*', but did not agree about this over-estimation of its worth. Explicitly, Heping identified the STTP qualifications as a positional good or 'scarcity good' ('*xi que chan pin*'): '*As more and more people hold the certificate, it was not a scarcity good any more.*'¹⁹ Nevertheless, Heping pointed out that the skill level required or assessed in the STTP exam was quite high, which consolidated the value of the certificate.

Heping thought that the role of the STTP programme was partly related to human capital accumulation in Shanghai. The government motivated people's participation, so as to equip them with new skills and knowledge for the city's economic development. Also, however, from the perspective of skilled talent management, the STTP qualifications could play a screening role to select qualified candidates.

Heping compared STTP qualifications with an elite university degree. When two university graduates competed with each other, the one with an elite university degree would have the advantage in the labour market. If, however, the elite university graduate held no other extra certificate and the other held some other '*high quality*' certificates, no matter which university he was from, he would have an advantage and stand out. In other words, extra certificates, like those from STTP, could reinforce

¹⁹ This is a direct translation from Chinese. It carries the meaning of a commodity for which the value is determined by its relative scarcity. It is therefore equivalent to 'positional good', but the literal translation is retained because it illustrates an awareness of the source of the value.

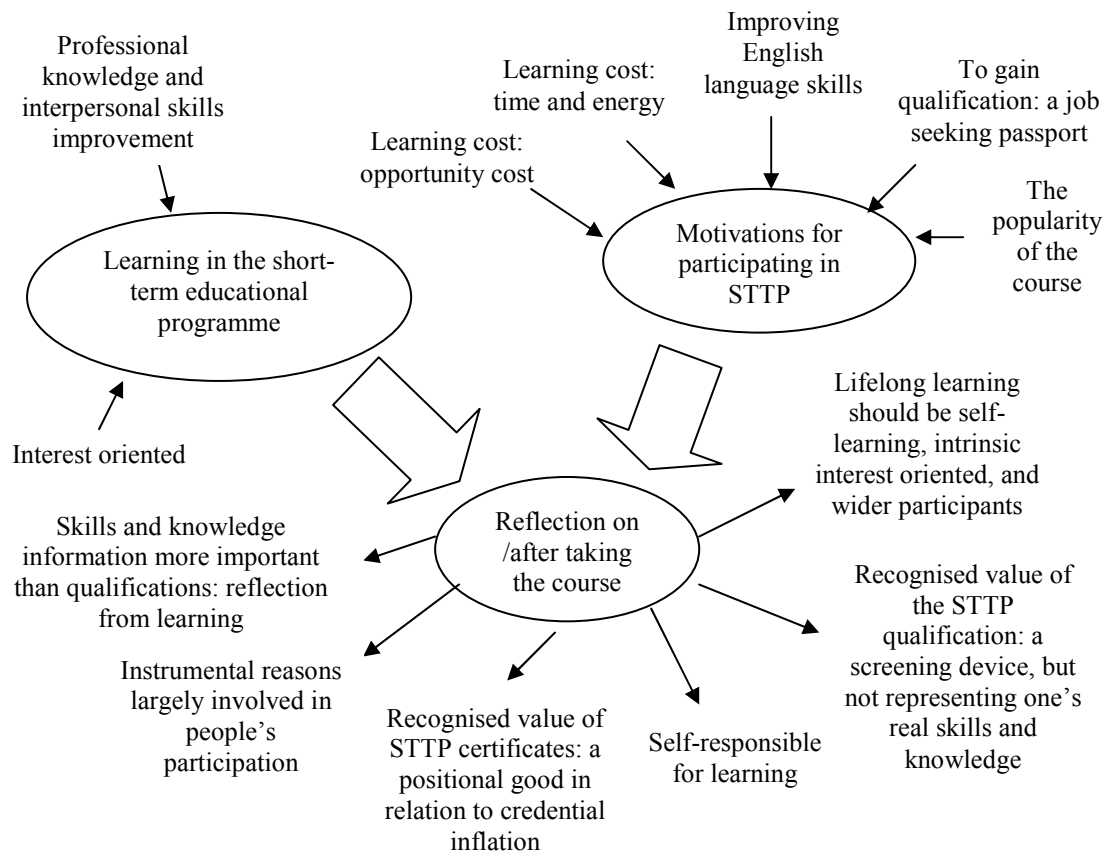
people's competitiveness, from Heping's point of view, to the extent of at least partially cancelling out advantage accruing to university status.

While commenting on the extent to which STTP could be seen as a form of lifelong learning, Heping noted that the participants were mainly in their twenties, thirties or forties. Lifelong learning should include people from all ages, he felt as '*live and learn*' (*'huo dao lao xue dao lao'*). Judging from the participants' characteristics, STTP could not yet be called 'lifelong learning'. In addition, Heping admitted that the phenomenon of gathering certificates in the current Shanghai labour market was unavoidable; it was the fierce competition for good jobs that forced people to do so. People inevitably needed more credentials to prove themselves, to reinforce their employability and to make themselves stand out in the crowd. It led to the situation of lifelong learning as a lifelong process of certificate gathering.

Overall comment on Heping's interview

Heping's decision to engage in STTP learning was formed by a mix of technocratic and credential reasons. He emphasized the importance of skills and knowledge improvement in one's learning, but doubted that degrees and qualifications could actually represent their holder's substantial abilities. He could not deny, however, the cultural influence on him leading him to value the gaining of a certificate as a means of enhancing his employability status. To understand Heping's perceptions on the relationship among skills, qualification and employability construction, his education history needs to be taken into consideration. Heping's undergraduate experience in a non-elite university made him aware of the importance of elite university degrees in terms of one's employability construction in the labour market competition. After doing his two postgraduate degrees in an elite university, his confidence has been boosted. Feeling confident in the qualifications he obtained and was going to obtain in the near future, Heping believed that he did not need to worry about the qualification in terms of building his employability. In other words, he could focus on developing and improving his skills and knowledge in education and training, so as to further enhance his personal capital.

Figure 6.3.1e Heping's learning story in STTP



6.3.2 The working and employer participants' stories

-- Liying's decision-making in STTP

Liying was working in the domestic trade department in a private business company and attended the logistics management course in STTP in her own time. She also sat the assessment and obtained the qualification. Her participation in STTP was self-funded. Liying declared that she would like to take the language course in STTP in the future if she had the time.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

According to Liying, there were three main reasons for her attending the logistics management course. First, a new government policy was implemented before Liying decided to take on the course, that to obtain certain job positions would require certificates in Shanghai, including trading business and logistics. In spite of being in employment already, Liying saw a potential future threat to holding her position

because she identified herself only with a college degree. In this case, her participation in the logistics course was firstly driven by the introduction of this policy. Participating in STTP, she found there were both students and working people attending the course, which made her realize its importance even more. Second, Liying wanted to obtain the certificate. Reflecting on her position as a college graduate with only two years' work experience, she found she tended to have fewer and fewer advantages compared with her colleagues or those new university graduates. To obtain an extra certificate could help her to reinforce her competitiveness. Third, it was *'not bad at all'* to learn new knowledge and skills. *'The logistics course is pretty new in STTP. More importantly, logistics, as an industry, is also quite new in Shanghai. ... Both companies and individuals lack systematic training and theoretical knowledge about logistics. I think it is necessary for those of us who are in the field of logistics to attend such courses and gain some systematic knowledge.'*

The logistics management course was newly designed to address the skill shortage in the Shanghai labour market and Liying believed that she could learn something from this course. She found that there were always some unexpected situations arising at work or new changes taking place. Through taking the course, she also learned things about which she had not had any clue, and which she had never encountered in her work. The knowledge and skills she learnt were considered valuable to her. *'Even if I will not use them in the future, it is always good to learn something new.'*

Liying did not think about learning costs in making her decision to take the course. As the government had implemented the new policy, sooner or later she would have to take the course and acquire the certificate. Thus, Liying decided to take part in the course when there were not so many people participating, since the first round exam was commonly perceived to be easier.

Asked if she had intentions to participate further in the STTP training, she said that she would participate in the language courses in STTP. First, because the English language courses were so popular in society now. Second, because she would like to find a better job position and being able to speak good English would help her with this. She explained that her current job position only dealt with domestic trading; she would like to develop her career towards international trading. Her poor knowledge of English and

the lack of a higher degree were identified as two of the biggest hindrances for her in moving towards her goal. *'Therefore, I should make use of more opportunities to improve myself and to obtain more credentials, so as to seek a better job.'* It is interesting to see that Liying pointed out these two learning goals in the same sentences.

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Liying had not heard of the notion of lifelong learning before the interview, but through looking at the Chinese characters, she supposed it meant learning across one's lifespan.

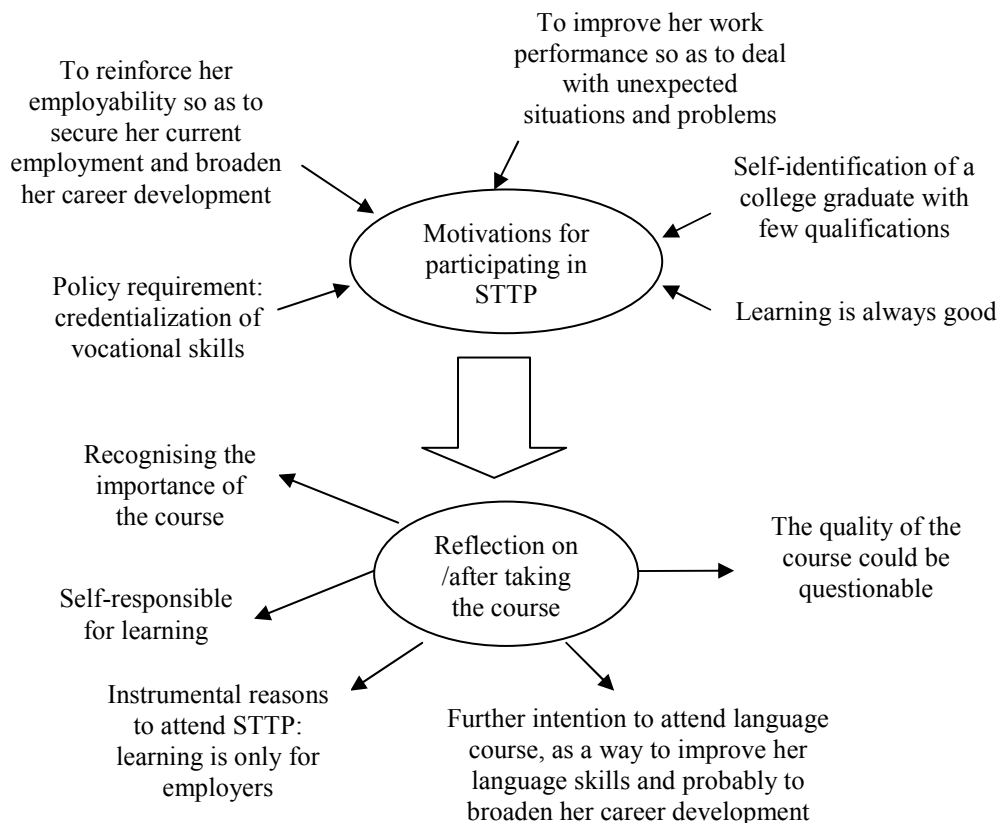
Liying's comment on the value of STTP and its qualifications

In Liying's opinion, some courses in STTP were designed to meet the skill demands of the current labour market; moreover, these skill demands were in shortage. Through individuals' participation in STTP, the level of human capital in Shanghai as a whole would be raised. However, in relation to its qualification, Liying thought the quality of the STTP might be questionable in view of its relative newness. In particular, she felt that features of the logistics management course, including its teaching, assessment and curriculum, were not fully developed or advanced. By observing her peer students in the logistics management course, Liying found different people had different reasons and motivations for attending the training. However, mainly, they came to learn for the purpose of obtaining the certificates; and *'it is difficult to say what the learners actually learnt. I think there are some potential problems or issues'*. On the one hand, Liying admitted that all kinds of credentials would be useful and important, no matter whether it was a national qualification or a local certificate. These extra credentials could help the holders to find better jobs. But, on the other hand, *'individuals needed to learn and improve their skills and knowledge through training. But at the moment, people are all rushing to get STTP qualifications.'* At the moment, most of the people aimed at the credentials more than actual skills, in order to get or keep a job, but not necessarily to do a job. At this point in the interview, Liying recalled one of her friends' words -- *'Why do you study these courses? We study the courses and obtain these qualifications only for our boss!'* It shows that Liying lacked confidence in herself. With her self-image as a relatively low-status college graduate and as an employee, she felt helpless and forced to do this training by the structural influence of credentialism, rather than being actively self-motivated to improve her skills and knowledge.

Overall comment on Liying's interview

Liying's participation in the logistics management course was influenced by a range of factors, which revealed the dynamic interaction between structural forces and the self. Firstly, Liying's engagement was constrained by the government policy to credentialize vocational skills. Secondly, while it is true that her learning was embedded in a deeply rooted cultural message that 'learning is good anyway', it was not until her actual participation that she realized the importance of this logistics course. It was interesting to note in this respect that Liying judged its importance in terms of the number of participants. Thirdly, Liying identified herself as being at a relatively disadvantaged position in the educational degree ladder. She saw this learning opportunity in STTP as a secure means to increase her personal capital, which in turn could consolidate her position and broaden her career development. (See Figure 6.3.2a)

Figure 6.3.2a Liying's learning story in STTP



-- Hanfei's decision-making in STTP

Hanfei took the advanced level interpretation course in her last year at university. She also sat the assessment, but only obtained the written test certificate. After her graduation, she had worked in the field of exposition and exhibition management. She

said she would think about taking the exposition management course in STTP if she needed to prove her abilities and skills.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

Two reasons motivated Hanfei to attend the STTP interpretation course. She considered obtaining the interpretation certificate as her prime motivation. *'This interpretation certificate is a 'hard currency' when we seek jobs.'* Identifying herself as graduating from a non-elite university, Hanfei pointed out the importance of having extra certificates to show her skills and knowledge to employers. *'It is always better to have a certificate than having nothing in your pocket.'* The second reason for her was to train and improve her English interpretation and translation skills. She referred to her English-major background here. *'We have to use Chinese and English in our work. A certain amount of professional translation skills is of great significance to us. Yes, we are English major, but translation between Chinese and English is not as easy as we think. It requires skills.'* Meanwhile, Hanfei did not think these two reasons conflicted with each other, but co-existed. One could improve his or her skills and knowledge and then achieve the credential. Also, one could firstly participate in the learning for the sake of obtaining credentials; and *'one's skills and knowledge could be improved more or less'.*

Hanfei did not think about the cost of learning. But she mentioned *'there is an opportunity cost to do anything. Once you pay the money, your motivations are naturally strengthened'.*

Asked about her intention to take any other courses in STTP, Hanfei stated that she would think of attending some job-related training, but not necessarily; as *'if I have already got certain skills and this was confirmed or valued by others, I would not go for any more training'.* To her, the certificates one held could tell others about his or her skills and knowledge, but at the same time, the effect of credentials was limited. Once one's skills were acknowledged by others through applying them at work, the certificates became useless. *'Now I have nearly three years' work experience, I don't need qualifications any more.'* So, the certificates only played a 'gate-keeper' role to Hanfei.

Views and experience of lifelong learning in general

Hanfei had heard of the notion of lifelong learning. From her point of view, lifelong learning in the current socio-economic context meant learning and improving oneself at work. Skills, rather than credentials, should be the focus of lifelong learning. Using this criterion to judge the STTP programme, Hanfei did not consider it as lifelong learning. People might improve or develop new skills and knowledge through the training, but through her observation, she believed more people studied in STTP merely for the purposes of obtaining qualifications. Hanfei argued that if one could not use the skills and knowledge learnt, one would easily forget them. In that case, all the effort made would be in vain. For that reason, STTP could not be called lifelong learning. In short, there are two points revealed here. First, lifelong learning to Hanfei has to meet personal development needs, not just learning for its own sake. Second, only those who take courses to improve skills and knowledge are engaging in real lifelong learning. Those who take courses for the qualification alone are not lifelong learners.

Hanfei's comments on the value of STTP and its qualifications

In general, Hanfei was positive about STTP itself. She commented on the value of the qualification in particular. As the STTP programme was designed and mainly organized by the government, she thought the STTP qualifications could be trusted. She also believed that the government had good control over the qualification quality and quantity. For example, the interpretation course was designed by the Shanghai Foreign Studies University which was the elite university in the field of foreign language learning in China; its assessment was also organized and judged by experts from this university. In Hanfei's view, the authority organizers could be seen as a symbol of quality control. In addition, part of the assessment is norm referenced; that is, from the result of the written test of the interpretation course, a fixed portion of students would be permitted to attend the oral test. This kind of quantity control of certificate holders showed that the oral test carried a sense of exclusivity and elite-ness.

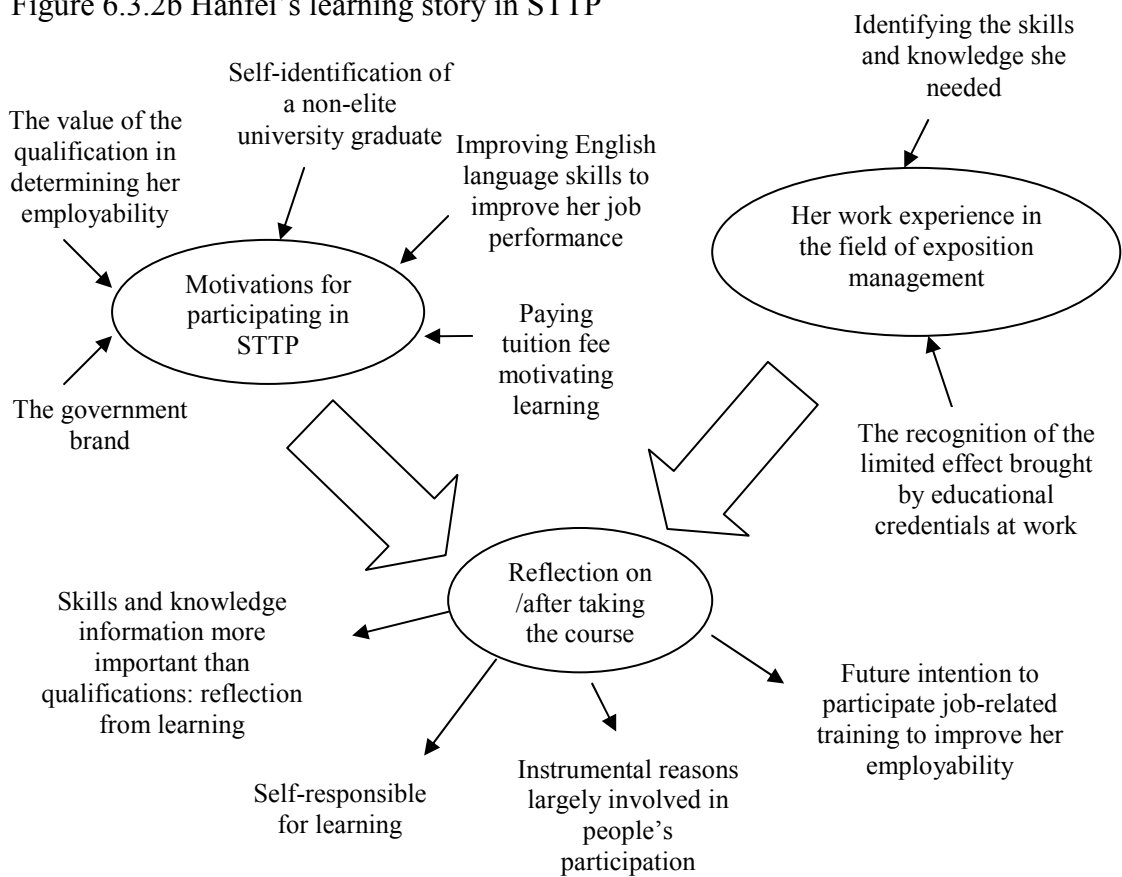
However, generally, Hanfei argued that any kind of qualification could only play a short-term role in constructing and consolidating one's employability. For new labour market entrants, a qualification could help to present their skills and knowledge to employers, as they had not yet had the chance to demonstrate their skills in practice;

whereas, people with work experience, such as Hanfei herself, would not need qualifications, as their real skills would have been revealed or performed at work.

Overall comment on Hanfei's interview

Hanfei's learning motivations changed as her study and work experience changed. Hanfei's account also reveals a complex mixture of confidence in her skills and a consciousness of her relatively lower status qualifications. While she studied at university, her learning was largely driven by instrumental motives. Identifying her possibly disadvantaged position in the labour market as a consequence of the structured ranking of elite and non-elite universities, she emphasized the value of the STTP qualifications in promoting her standing in the labour market competition. Through her work experience, she found the actual value of the qualification was limited. She was confident that she had demonstrated her skills and knowledge at work and thus the qualification might not be so important to her. It shifted her learning motivation towards skills and knowledge development.

Figure 6.3.2b Hanfei's learning story in STTP



-- Xiawei's decision-making in STTP

Xiawei participated in the STTP management course, which was delivered in a department of an elite university. He had a college degree in the field of automobile design.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

Away from work, Xiawei felt his leisure time was not being put to good use. *'Since I am free, I'd better study something. To study is always good. And the certificate obtained from this course can be useful to me.'* He recalled how he found this management course in STTP. He had heard of the course earlier through friends and found the tuition fee for the course was not high. It had been quite a long time since Xiawei had participated in formal education and training, so he decided he would like to see if he could manage the learning and the assessment as well. Reflecting on his college study experience and the relatively lower status of a college degree, Xiawei felt that it was a pity that he had no experience of studying in an elite university. After

finding the course was delivered in one of the elite universities in Shanghai, Xiawei talked of his desire to experience learning in an elite university, to feel the learning atmosphere and experience the teaching.

In addition, Xiawei was thinking of moving his career towards management. In this case, a management course could offer him some knowledge in this field, and also provide him with a qualification. Xiawei was still not sure whether he would change his job, so that he did not expect the knowledge and skills he learnt might be directly used in his future work; but he reiterated *'it is always good to learn something. If one day I would like to change my job, this learning experience will help me. I know only learning this course and reading from the books are not sufficient, but learning can equip me with more confidence.'*

Through his observation of other students who participated in the STTP courses, Xiawei found that more people studied in STTP for the purpose of gaining credentials and he felt a little insecure if not participating in the learning and gaining the qualification. He attributed this phenomenon to higher education expansion that people were seeking for more certificates to make themselves stand out. As a college graduate, he felt pressured or potentially threatened to see so many university graduates out there in the labour market. In this situation, an additional qualification could serve as something of an 'insurance policy'. Therefore, *'with more extra certificates, I do not need to worry when it comes to promotion, changing jobs and also lay-off.'*

Asked whether he had engaged in cost-benefit considerations, Xiawei said he had never thought about it, and *'there is no need to think about it. The tuition fee is not high anyway. If I do not make use of my spare time to study, I will spend more money on playing. The cost of playing will be much more'*.

Views and experiences of lifelong learning in general

Xiawei had briefly heard of the notion of lifelong learning. To him, *'it must mean live and learn'* (*'huo dao lao xue dao lao'*). At this point of the interview, Xiawei argued that learning should not only happen at schools or institutions, because people could learn all kinds of things at work and by themselves. *'At the end of the day, credentials are important, but we do not have to obtain them. The most important is whether we*

have the skills and knowledge.’ So, to Xiawei, the STTP programme as a whole could only be considered as one forms of the ‘rainbow concept’ of lifelong learning (Evans, 2006).

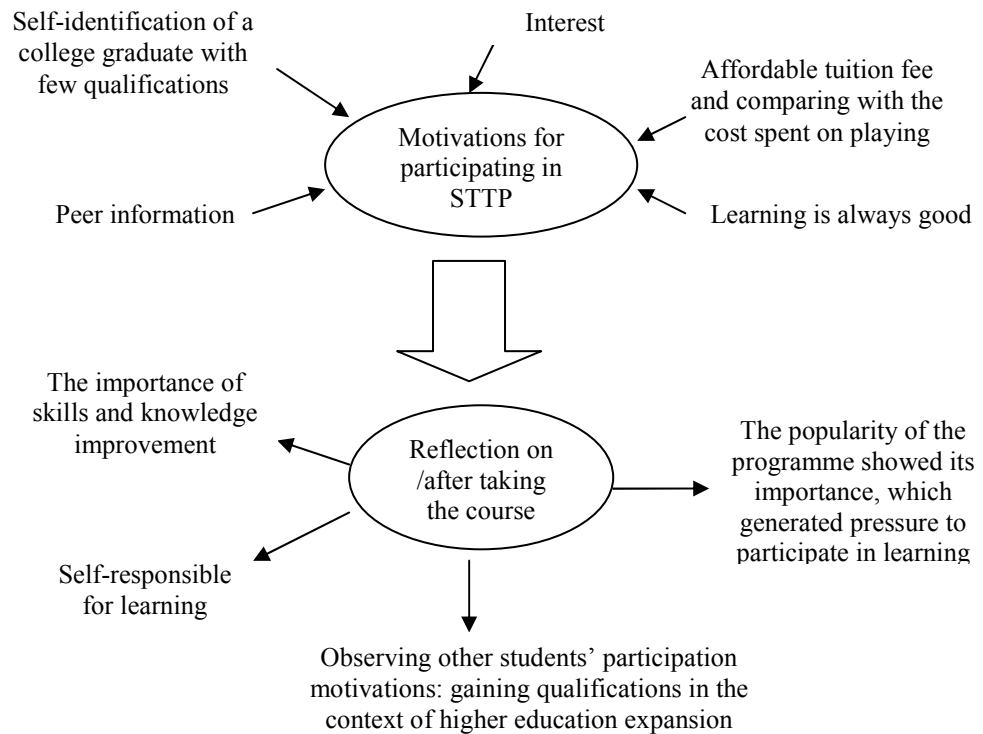
Xiawei’s comment on the value of STTP and its qualifications

Xiawei found it was not possible to make a judgement on the value of the STTP programme. To him, learning depended on oneself, and *‘as long as I achieve some knowledge and skills from the learning, I feel that is worthwhile. I do not have to get the certificate’*. So value is not an inherent part of a programme. It is about how one uses it, personally. This reveals Xiawei’s perception of one’s self-responsibility for learning.

Overall comment on Xiawei’s interview

Xiawei’s self-identity as holding a college degree played a critical role in motivating his learning. He realized the role and value of credentials in securing and protecting its holders in the labour market competition. Meanwhile, a deeply-rooted belief in learning also formed an important part of his motivations to learn. In terms of learning costs, his calculation was restricted within the affordability of the tuition fee, rather than a comprehensive cost-benefit consideration. This again related to his strong belief in ‘learning is always good’. In the process of decision-making, there was a trade-off for him between studying the courses and enjoying other leisure activities. Based on his calculations on the value of learning and the spending on learning and playing, Xiawei thought the opportunity cost of playing is more. In other words, the cultural value consideration in Xiawei’s learning motivation challenges the economic sense of benefit calculation suggested in the strong version of rational choice theory. Also, it was found that Xiawei attached more responsibility for learning to himself and stated that it was the self that mattered in (all kinds of) learning, rather than the training course itself or the inherent value of the course.

Figure 6.3.2c Xiawei's learning story in STTP



-- Wangyuan's decision-making in STTP

Wangyuan had taken two STTP courses since his university studies. He did the advanced level interpretation course first, in his last year at university. After studying in the UK for two years and obtaining two master degrees in the fields of finance and marketing, he was working in a leading auditing company. In his spare time, he took the STTP financial and accounting course.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

Wangyuan found his learning attitudes or motivations were different in participating in the two STTP courses. Firstly, in taking the advanced level interpretation course in his fourth year at a non-elite university, he clearly stated that he was motivated by the purpose of seeking a job. Due to higher education expansion, a university degree was not enough to make him stand out among the competitors. As part of Wangyuan's first degree was in English language, he thought this interpretation course certificate could probably further certify his language skills, acting as a form of proof in seeking employment. In addition, he mentioned that the interpretation course and its certificate were very popular in Shanghai.

Secondly, Wangyuan found his learning motivation changed gradually as his learning and work experience grew and he reckoned that his current learning in the finance course of STTP was driven by a desire for skill improvement and self-fulfilment. He identified three reasons for this. First, Wangyuan aimed at accumulating, reinforcing and updating his knowledge in this field. Some of the course content delivered in the STTP finance course was covered in his previous study, but Wangyuan thought it was another chance for him to revise and consolidate the knowledge. Second, he also took this chance to get to know and meet different people from different parts of Shanghai society, such as different companies, different industry sectors, etc. Wangyuan saw this as a way to improve his interpersonal skills²⁰. Third, sharing the views of Liying, Wangyuan thought that, as the finance course in STTP was relatively newly developed, it would be easier to obtain the certificate at this stage. Compared with those well-developed courses in STTP, such as the computing courses and the interpretation courses, the number of course participants could be smaller, which could improve his chance of obtaining the certificate. Interestingly, he added that this certificate could assist him in any future job or job promotion. At this point, Wangyuan mentioned he would take another finance course in STTP, that is, CPA (Certified Public Accountant). The CPA course has only been included in the new programmes of STTP in the last few years. As a final comment, Wangyuan added that *'to study is always a good thing to do. ... Lots of stuff we learnt... we should not expect to use them immediately. But we all know that to learn is better than not to learn. ... I have to admit that what we learn from books and classes will never be sufficient for us. But the more we learn, the more confident we will be. ... so I took part in the course.'* At least, three points are expressed in this single statement: learning for its own sake, learning for self-fulfilment and learning for confidence boosting, revealing a complex mixture of individual learning motivations.

Asked if he would take the language course again, Wangyuan gave a negative answer. He found his English language skills have been confirmed or acknowledged by others. In this case, extra language qualifications would be no use to him. He compared the CPA qualification with the STTP interpretation qualification.

²⁰ Wangyuan explicitly stated that meeting people from different parts of the society was one of his motivations, but it was not expressed as a way of his accumulating social capital, in contrast to the position expressed by the employer interviewee Lingang's story (below).

'The interpretation course certificate certifies your English level. It can assist you to demonstrate your ability before people get to know you well and give you the chance to perform yourself. But after this finance course in STTP, I am intending to do another qualification, CPA. It is also part of the STTP programme. It is an authoritative certificate in the field of accounting and auditing. Without this certificate, an accountant has no authority to sign a financial report in China. It is a requisite for an accounting job. ... but without an interpretation certificate, one can still be an interpreter or translator.'

This adds an extra dimension to the currency value of a certificate, which has been raised earlier. That is, the value also depends on the authority behind it and its wider recognition as certifying competency, within the professional field.

In terms of cost-benefit considerations, Wangyuan thought this decision making to engage in additional learning needed lots of planning and calculating. However, it was impossible to calculate real costs and benefits, because the decision contained non-financial considerations as well and individuals would never achieve the best option or profit calculation in reality.

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Wangyuan was familiar with the notion of lifelong learning. He emphasized that lifelong learning should mean learning for non-instrumental reasons, namely, for personal interest, for self-fulfilment, for pleasure and leisure, etc. In his opinion, learning needs would change over a person's different life stages. One might learn to help in seeking jobs, learn to improve work performance, or learn to improve one's competitiveness. These forms of learning could not be called lifelong learning. *'[but] when people retire, they go to the University for the Third Age and learn things like drawing, music, English or other languages. I think people learn knowledge and skills which they did not learn or experience before. To me, this form of learning is from their heart, to fulfil their dreams or interests. This should be called lifelong learning.'* Wangyuan added *'what we learn from the 'real' lifelong learning might not be directly useful at our work, but people will achieve happiness and self-fulfilment from the learning.'* The idea of 'learning is good for its own sake' is reflected in his opinion.

In talking about his other learning experiences, Wangyuan described the on-the-job training organized by his company. He found that this on-the-job training was about developing both professional and generic skills and knowledge, about interpersonal skills, leadership and teamwork skills. It was an experience of learning the organizational culture, through which the staff members would know more about the company, integrate themselves into the company and improve their efficiency at work. *'It is different from other forms of education and training. It trains our comprehensive abilities.'*

Wangyuan's comment on the value of STTP and its qualifications

Based on his views on lifelong learning and also from his observation of people who attended the STTP courses, he did not consider STTP as lifelong learning. *'STTP is only a kind of vocational training.'* Here, Wangyuan raised the issue of the Chinese style of assessment in relation to the validity and quality of the STTP qualifications. He did not deny the skill improvement that might take place in the course; however, due to the rote-learning style demanded by the assessment, he questioned whether the STTP qualification showed its holder's skills and knowledge or merely its holder's abilities to deal with these formal exams. Additionally, Wangyuan believed that once education and training was certified or involved qualifications, people's motivation could be distorted, especially under the influence of fierce labour market competition. Qualifications became the learner's target, not learning itself.

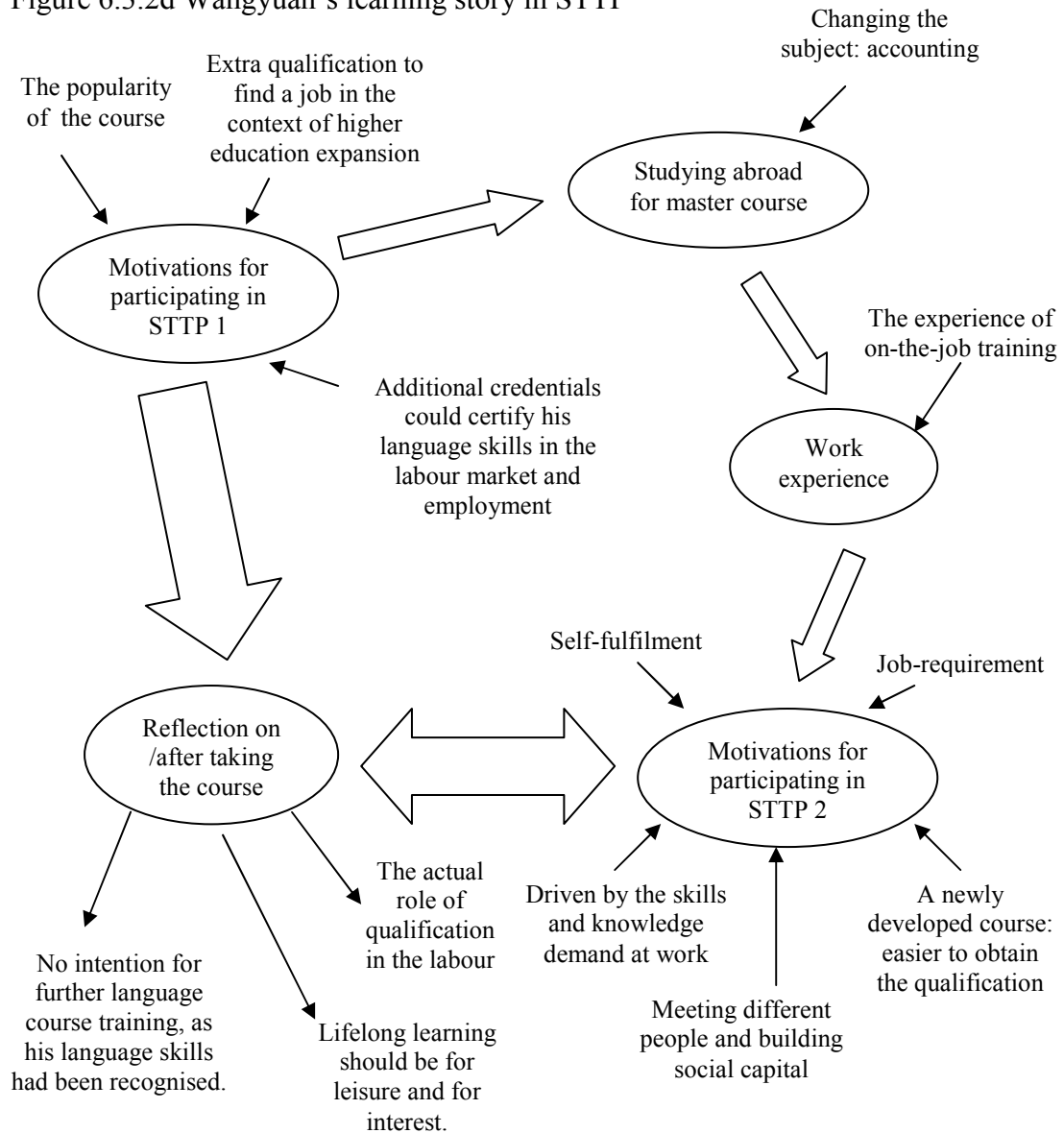
Overall comments on Wangyuan's interview

Wangyuan's different learning and work experiences at different life stages appears to have exerted a different influences on his motivations for learning in STTP. Wangyuan recognized his limited cultural capital as a non-elite university graduate. To improve his standing, he firstly chose to take the STTP interpretation course and try to gain the extra certificate. His study experience abroad and achievement of two master degrees increased his cultural capital further. It also assisted him in finding a job in a foreign auditing company. To reinforce and update his professional skills and improve his work performance, he chose to participate in a job-related training course in STTP and focused on acquiring knowledge rather than qualification. Meanwhile, his participation in on-the-job-training offered him a different learning experience or a different form of

learning. It in turn affected his opinions and broadened his views on learning. However, interestingly, his current work required him to gain a professional accountant certificate, which in the long term would enable him to be qualified for a senior-level job in the field of accounting.

In the interview, Wangyuan expressed his views that employability was a multi-factorial concept. His narrative of his learning trajectories revealed that Wangyuan had held different views at different ages, or more precise at different stages of his study and career development. As a student, cultural capital in the form of qualification from elite university was emphasized; and as an employee, this was replaced by a focus on social capital in the form of social networks in particular. Hence, as Wangyuan argued himself, learning motivations and needs changed as individuals grew up, in response to different social settings where learning and work took place. However, throughout the interview, Wangyuan repeatedly referred to the certificate and qualification's value in his future job and job promotion, rather than the skills and knowledge gained during a course. In a sense, his learning was still bundled, even if subconsciously, with the certified job requirements. (See Figure 6.3.2d)

Figure 6.3.2d Wangyuan's learning story in STTP



-- Lingang's learning experience

Lingang, a general manager in a large state-owned electrical engineering company, took one of the management courses in STTP in 1996 but did not sit the exam. He was currently studying in another newly promoted management course in STTP. He explicitly declared that his learning was not motivated by achieving the qualifications.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

Lingang recalled his motivations and learning needs behind his current participation in STTP. The first reason was to meet the requirements of his job. Lingang majored in electrical engineering for his first degree, from an elite university. In spite of about ten

years' management work experience, he still thought he needed theoretical knowledge to enhance his management work and complement his practice or work experience. Second, Lingang thought it would always be good to learn something. Third, as his classmates were from different industrial sectors and almost all were working at upper management levels, it would be a valuable opportunity for Lingang to expand his social network. According to Lingang, the tuition fee for this management course was quite expensive; therefore, those people who could afford it must be '*from relatively high social levels*' and must '*have excellent capability*'. Fourth, Lingang was told the teaching styles in this course were different from the traditional 'rote learning' style, which attracted him to experience these different teaching and learning modes.

Though the course fee was high, Lingang did not think too much about it. Due to his top-management position, part of the tuition fee could be covered by the company. Moreover, the course schedule was relatively short and intensively arranged at weekends, which was quite suitable for Lingang's busy work load.

Later on in the interview, Lingang talked about his first participation in the STTP programme. He took part in a similar management course which lasted four months in 1996. After studying on the course, Lingang decided not to sit the exam or obtain the certificate from this course.

'I did not think it was necessary to achieve the certificate after studying. It was too formalized. The training was only four months. The teacher only read the textbooks. We students were asked to recite the textbooks before taking the exam. What is the point? Do you think I could be called 'a skilled talent in shortage' after remembering all that the book says? I did not think I had improved myself after the three months. I was still I. I do not think this kind of assessment was valid or useful.' Because of this experience, Lingang did not value some of the certificates from STTP so much when he recruited people – '*the qualifications an individual has can only tell me this person is hardworking and has the ability to deal with all kinds of assessment*'.

Through his experience in the course and his observation, Lingang found the motivations and reasons for people to attend the STTP courses were multi-faceted, and

most people came to study for the purpose of seeking jobs. Therefore, Lingang came to a conclusion that *'some people's participations in some STTP courses were too instrumental. Little skills or knowledge were improved. The courses do not play their role to train and enhance the learners' quality and ability. So, to me, an individual's ability and quality has nothing to do with the qualifications this individual has got'.*

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Lingang was familiar with the notions of lifelong learning and a learning society. In his opinion, these notions meant everyone in this society should 'live and learn' (*'huo dao lao, xue dao lao'*). Again, the idea that learning was always good was reiterated. Lingang also emphasized that the development of skills and knowledge should be the focus in one's lifelong learning, rather than credentials or instrumental reasons.

Lingang's comments on the value of STTP and its qualifications

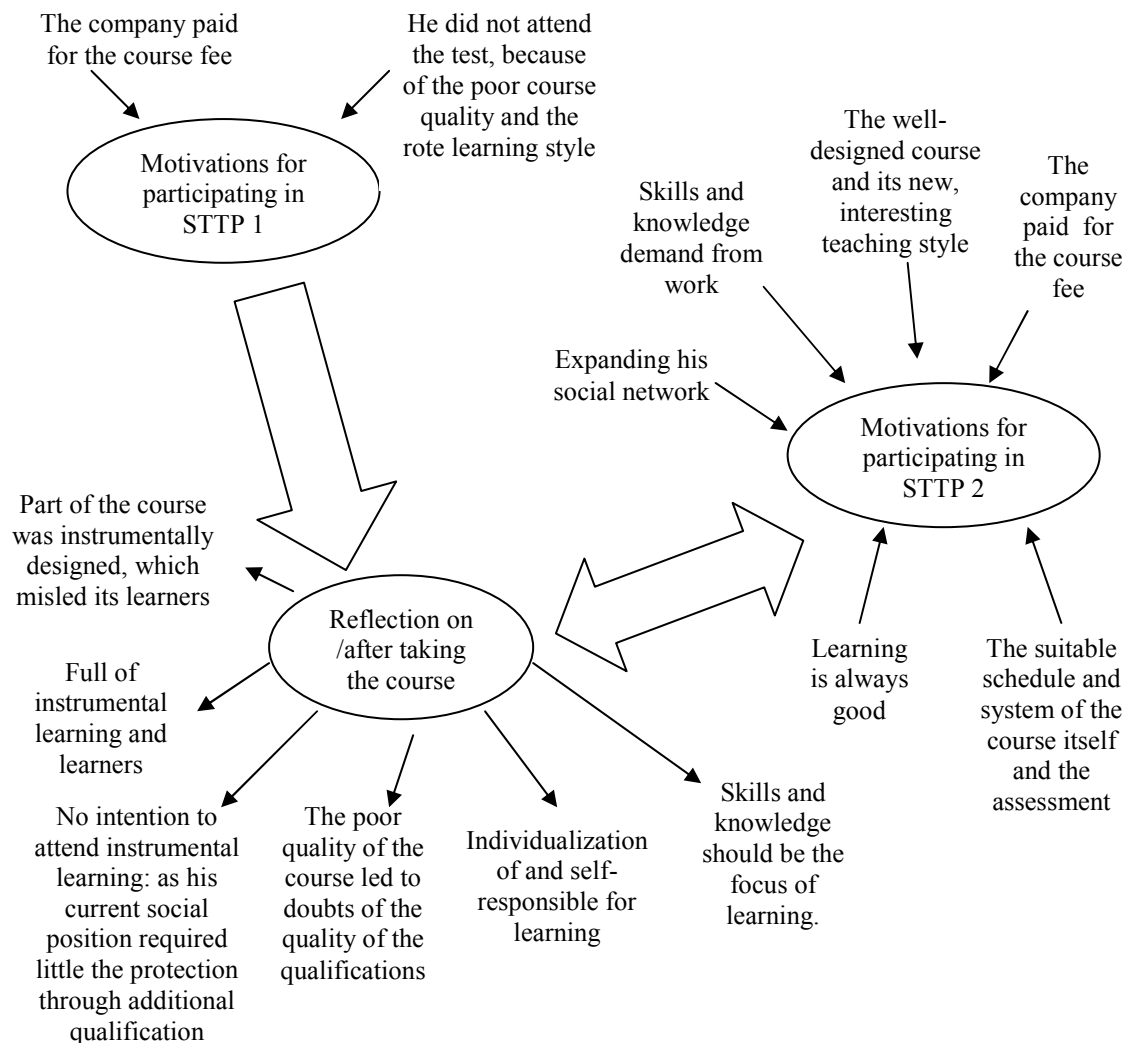
In relation to his definition of lifelong learning and a learning society, Lingang did not value STTP as a lifelong learning programme, because the teaching and learning was too instrumental and formalized. Comparing his two experiences in the STTP management courses, he preferred the second chance as a kind of learning where the course content was up-to-date and the teaching and learning styles were different. He felt that these changes helped him to improve and consolidate his skills and knowledge. In addition, Lingang at the end of the interview mentioned that learning also depended on individuals, their motivations and their attitudes towards it. Taking himself as an example, he declared: *'I am not worried about job seeking. I am not worried about getting certificates to help me seek a job. My only goal was to improve my knowledge on management. This could be thought of as lifelong learning.'*

Overall comments on Lingang's interview

Lingang was among the first group of university graduates since the university entrance exam was reintroduced in China at the end of 1970s. His elite university degree firstly enabled him to secure his position at work, which generated valuable work experience for him. All these experiences led him to promotion at work and further secured his position. Even after the economic reform, Lingang stated that he did not feel any pressure or risk in terms of his work position. Under this circumstance, Lingang's learning was apparently not driven or pressured by qualification demand at all. He was

aiming for skill improvement and social capital development. Again, previous learning and work experience exerted a particular influence on Lingang's identity and learning experience. (See Figure 6.3.2e)

Figure 6.3.2e Lingang's learning story in STTP



-- Ouyang's learning experience

Appointed as a regional manager in a foreign bank, Ouyang was transferred from Canada to the Shanghai branch a few years ago.

Motivations for attending STTP and other considerations in attending the course

Ouyang attended one STTP finance course a year ago. The main motivation for him was to update his professional knowledge and information through the training. As an expatriate, Ouyang realized that he might have some knowledge gaps on the regulation

and policy changes in the Chinese finance sector. In order to update and complement this industry-related information and knowledge, he sat in the STTP course. He explicitly stated that to obtain a qualification was not included in his learning motivations at all, as he had overseas learning and work experience and a relatively secure position in the bank.

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Once again, Ouyang quoted the idiom 'live and learn' in Chinese ('*huo dao lao xue dao lao*') when being asked if he had heard of the notion of lifelong learning. In his opinion, lifelong learning was of great importance for the updating and improvement of existing knowledge and skills. He explained that due to the rapid socio-economic development in China and especially in Shanghai, radical changes have taken place. For instance, new technologies and techniques have emerged and been applied in the finance sector. In this sector, there have also been changes in the relevant regulations and rules. This became even more evident after China's entry into WTO. Many national and local policies and regulations were adjusted or abolished in line with international standards. Under this circumstance, it was essential to renew one's knowledge in order to improve work performance. To Ouyang, lifelong learning offered an opportunity for individuals to update their professional knowledge and skills. In the interview, he was also asked what he would think of an employee was taking some training course. Ouyang thought that it revealed this employee's desire to learn and '*learning is always good for self-development*'. However, he also noted that if an employee was taking a certain course which was less relevant to his or her current job, he would see it as a potential threat in that it might signal the employee's intention of changing her job.

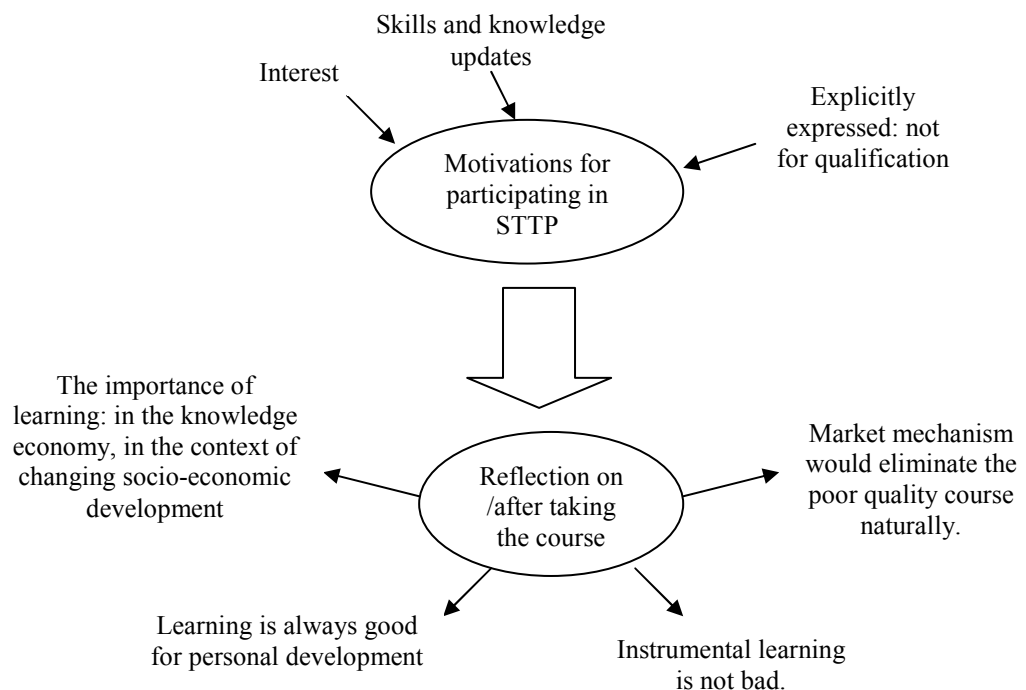
Ouyang's comments on the value of STTP and its qualifications

Ouyang noticed that there were a great variety of training courses in the current Shanghai labour market, including STTP. The quality of those courses was varied, even among the STTP courses; different institutions might also provide different standards of teaching. As a result, he could not generalize his comments on them. Additionally, he had quite a positive opinion on marketizing education and training and believed that poor-quality training, either the course itself or the course provider, would be eliminated from the educational market sooner or later. Therefore, he was not worried about the quality of the STTP programme.

Overall comments on Ouyang's interview

Throughout the interview, a strong instrumental view on education and training, especially on lifelong learning, could be sensed. Ouyang mainly took part in learning so as to improve his work performance. His advantaged social position allowed him to choose to learn without being pressured to obtain credentials to reinforce his employability. Interestingly, on the one hand, he would encourage his colleagues and employees to participate in all kinds of learning. On the other hand, he would feel threatened if their learning was not so related to their current work. It is worth noting that Ouyang, similarly to Lingang, held a relatively secured position in the labour market. His participation in STTP was heavily driven by the desire to learn new skills and knowledge; rather than qualification collecting.

Figure 6.3.2f Ouyang's learning story in STTP



6.3.3 The non-participants' stories

-- Xingqi

Xingqi was a second year university student. He had not taken part in any courses in STTP. Despite not yet having entered the labour market competition, Xingqi already

felt it pressured and it could be very hard to find a job. The best way to relieve his pressure was to update his skills and knowledge continuously, he declared.

Reasons for his non-participation in STTP

Xingqi was very familiar with the STTP programme; but he had decided not to attend any course in it, because he thought it would be better and more efficient to teach himself, rather than being taught. His friends who attended this kind of training had told him that the teaching just trained or taught them how to deal with the exams. *'What they really learned was how to deal with the assessment and how to obtain the qualification.'*

On the subject of passing the STTP assessments and obtaining qualifications, Xingqi found it could be a matter of luck and opportunism. On the one hand, Xingqi had to admit the predominant role of credentials in employment. *'If you have a certificate and I do not have, you have one more chip to win. It is very important.'* On the other hand, Xingqi thought that some people might have had more luck, passed the exam and obtained the qualification. *'Employers maybe acknowledge this certificate and offer the holder a job. But if this person can not show his real skills and knowledge in practice, the employer will still have the chance to fire him.'* To Xingqi, if a person had no 'substantial' skills and knowledge, a certificate was just an empty piece of paper. Xingqi's decision-making on participation in education and training in general would depend on how much real skills and knowledge he could achieve from it.

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Lifelong learning to Xingqi meant voluntary learning and self-learning. *'In my opinion, we will encounter all kinds of difficulties in our lives. We may not be able to solve all of them by using the knowledge from previous study. It will be the time for us to find answers. To me, such a self-learning process can be called lifelong learning.'*

Xingqi also talked about his experience of learning Spanish, which arose purely due to his interest. He did not expect this learning experience would generate any immediate benefits (*'hao chu'*, which means benefits, not necessarily financial); but firmly believed that he would be able to use this skill one day in the future.

Given his interpretation of lifelong learning, Xingqi did not consider STTP as part of lifelong learning. According to his observation of his peers, he found people's participation in STTP and gaining qualifications was largely for instrumental reasons and the role of credentials to represent the holder's skills and knowledge had been ignored by people, such as students, teachers and course designers. He doubted whether these certificate holders could deal with problems in real situations.

Overall comment on Xingqi's interview

Throughout the interview, not denying the structural role of qualifications in one's life chances in the labour market, Xingqi showed his strong belief that skills and knowledge should be the focus of learning, rather than merely obtaining a certificate. In spite of his non-participation in STTP, Xingqi actually had considerable knowledge about some courses in this programme, from both the media and his peers' experiences. The exam-oriented teaching and learning style in some STTP courses disappointed Xingqi most and deterred him from attending the course. Rather than taking part in the courses and learning how to handle exams, Xingqi had no intention of trying to obtain STTP certificates and preferred to learn on his own. It can be argued first that Xingqi was confident about his own degree certificate and believed that his degree certificate would demonstrate his skills. Also, his non-participation could be related to the fact that he was still a year two student and was not at a crucial stage of seeking employment. Rather than trying to obtain whatever certificate was available in the learning market, he could still afford to choose what he was interested in learning, such as Spanish. Hence, his non-participation was influenced by his attitudes towards 'self-learning' and confidence in his cultural capital.

-- Wenbin

Wenbin, who graduated from an elite university, had been working in a leading IT company for about two years. Wenbin did not feel so pressured about his position in the labour market competition. His elite university degree, along with two years' work experience, was found useful to secure his position in the company. In his opinion, a good job would provide space for individuals to improve and gain promotion. *'Always following others was not fun. I like challenges.'* At this time, he was more concerned about how to improve his work performance, than securing his standing in the employment competition.

Reasons for his non-participation in STTP

Wenbin had heard of the STTP programme but had little information about it. Having some information about some courses, such as interpretation and computing courses, he had decided not to attend any STTP courses and had no intention to do so. There were two main reasons for his non-participation. First, the level and the content of the skills and knowledge provided in the STTP courses did not match Wenbin's learning needs. Identifying himself as a computer science major, he found the STTP computing courses were designed for non-computer science students, since these courses only offered basic knowledge. Other courses, such as interpretation and management courses, were irrelevant to his current job. Moreover, Wenbin thought that *'if I am really interested in it, I can learn or teach myself'*. In his opinion, to take the STTP courses would not necessarily be more beneficial than self-learning in terms of skill and knowledge improvement. Related to this, Wenbin had taken learning cost and the quality of the course into consideration when making his decisions about participation in education and training in general. He had decided that he would participate in those courses which required a relatively low or at least affordable tuition fee but certainly provided high quality. *'I do think about (learning) cost and return. If the tuition fee is not high and it can offer a quality course like the English training courses in Wall Street Institute²¹, I will definitely go.'* In addition, Wenbin felt confident and considered his degree from an elite university to be a protection within the labour market competition and employment; thus, he did not value the STTP certificate very highly.

In spite of his non-participation in STTP, Wenbin was aware of its high popularity in Shanghai. From his observations, he concluded that people's participation in STTP was mainly for the purpose of gaining its certificates to add extra value to their university degrees, because

'the higher education expansion generates so many university graduates. Everyone becomes the same. Companies still need to select people in line with their qualifications and certificates. Regardless, Chinese people believe in exams and credentials. ... Credentials play a significant role in employment selection, but it is not the complete story. It is not necessarily true that a good qualification

²¹ Wall Street Institute offers English learning. It is famous for its high quality teaching and learning, as well as its expensive tuition fee.

can assure people to be employed. But one has to have different credentials if one would like more choices of job opportunities.'

From Wenbin's point of view, credentialism acted as a cultural force which influenced people's learning participation in STTP and other sorts of learning training. Hence, the STTP qualification was utilized as a positional good for individuals to ensure their life chances in employment. Later on in the interview, he also commented on the STTP courses and its certificates. Wenbin thought the STTP courses did not play the role of motivating and facilitating people's learning. Apart from a view similar as Xingqi on its exam-oriented teaching and rigid assessment, Wenbin added that the whole training system was nothing more than that *'people pay money to buy its certificates. There is no learning involved.'*

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Lifelong learning to Wenbin meant *'live and learn'* (*'huo dao lao xue dao lao'*). He also maintained that it should be self-learning and voluntary learning. Through different learning experiences, one would update one's skills and knowledge, and obtain the knowledge for further self-development. Wenbin employed the on-the-job training in his company as a positive example of lifelong learning. *'The company I work for provides good training. Through the training, more ideas are provided, which further leads us to think and improve our performance.'* Also, he found the on-the-job training was not only about professional skills and knowledge, but also an opportunity for the development of interpersonal skills. Based on his definition of lifelong learning, he insisted that the STTP programme could not be called lifelong learning.

Overall comment on Wenbin's interview

Throughout the interview with Wenbin, a strong technocratic view appeared in terms of his perceptions on learning and the role of credentials. He pointed out that the value of education and training courses should arise from substantial learning taking place; in other words, skills and knowledge improvement. He could not avoid admitting the screening role of credentials in employment.

Wenbin's non-participation in STTP was driven by his previous learning experience. His previous study in an elite university and the elite university degree he possessed had

led him to his current job position. In addition, his work experience further consolidated his standing in the labour market. This self-identification told Wenbin that he had a secure position in his employment, hence influencing his learning motivations and opinions towards STTP. Moreover, the course content in an elite university was considered to be more ‘in-depth’ than that delivered in STTP, since STTP was perceived to be targeted at non-specialists.

-- Jiawei

Jiawei achieved her first degree in English and international trade in a non-elite university in Shanghai, followed by a master’s degree in risk management from a British university. She was working in a middle-level management position in a foreign furniture company. Through the analysis of her perceptions of the labour market competition, we find that, compared to the other interviewees from a non-elite university, Jiawei held a relatively positive opinion of her bachelor degree, as *‘higher education was not as much expanded as it is now, so university degrees were quite valuable in general’*. During her university studies in Shanghai, she did not attend any STTP courses. After coming back from the UK and starting work, she was quite busy and did not have the chance to take part in any learning outside work.

Reasons for her non-participation

Jiawei had heard of the STTP programme during her university studies in Shanghai, but had relatively little knowledge about it. Having majored in English and international trade, she knew about some courses on interpretation, economics and finance; part of the information came from her friends and classmates. There were two reasons why she did not participate in the courses while she was a student. Firstly, Jiawei intended to engage in postgraduate study abroad, and so spent her time preparing for this. *‘Time and effort were a kind of cost and spending. I could not really afford them [taking both STTP courses and preparing studying abroad] at that time.’* She also indicated that to study abroad did not require learning experience from STTP so that it was of no immediate instrumental value to her. But Jiawei pointed out this was not all which led to her non-participation in STTP. Taking the interpretation course as an example, Jiawei found that her university study had already covered the skills and knowledge delivered in STTP. Moreover, *‘the knowledge depth was even greater than that of the STTP courses. Thus, there was no need for me to take the courses’*.

Her job in the furniture company was quite different from her undergraduate and postgraduate studies. She found she lacked of knowledge in the fields of furniture manufacturing and organization management. This became a potential risk for her work performance and, therefore, she wanted to attend the training. However, due to her frequent business trips and busy schedule, she could not make the time to take any training outside work. She also indicated her intention to take some courses in accounting management and organizational management for the purposes of both job demands and personal interests, if she could find some time free.

Jiawei made two points about the value of STTP and its qualifications. First, as middle management staff, she experienced the process of being employed and employing others. She found the first step in the decision making over whether to employ someone was to know a person was from that person's CV. Within the CV, she declared, educational qualifications were the first element to be considered. Holding different qualifications could help to create a *'good first impression'* for employers that this candidate had strong desire to learn. Second, at the same time, being aware of the social recognition of the STTP qualifications as *'platinum certificates'* as well as their potentially problematic assessment system, Jiawei thought that *'as long as one makes his or her effort to pass the exam, one's skills and knowledge must have been improved, from taking the courses to sitting in the exam. ... Some people look down upon the way of the exams, saying you only need to remember two books and then the certificate is yours. I think if the person does not have some skills and knowledge himself, he would not be able to pass the exam. ... I am not saying that I value the STTP certificates so much, but I believe those who have the certificates do have certain skills and knowledge.'*

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Jiawei put an emphasis on 'self' when explaining her understanding of lifelong learning. In her opinion, lifelong learning should be self-learning to absorb, update and improve skills and knowledge. Jiawei maintained that any form of learning should generate some value, which could be obtaining certificates and developing skills and knowledge. In addition, Jiawei firmly believed that as long as one made an effort, one's ability would anyway have been enhanced. So Jiawei's judgement on the value of learning was that it lay in what she had learnt from the course, rather than the certificate itself.

Jiawei considered STTP as an opportunity for people to meet their learning demands. She had not attended any STTP courses yet, but held a positive attitude about learning in this programme. She wished to learn '*substantial skills and knowledge*' from the course and inspire her thinking and working, which she would view as '*really meaningful learning* [from STTP] '.

Toward the end of the interview, Jiawei expressed a strong aspiration for taking part in further learning. She identified three types of 'risk' in her working life, which directly affected her confidence and desire to learn. The first risk arising from her work was whether she could accomplish any given task to a high enough standard. Second, competition with colleagues was another risk to Jiawei. If two people were doing a similar task, a competition was naturally formed. Jiawei felt these two people would be compared by the colleagues. The first two types of risks generated a sense of 'insecurity' and 'pressure', which was the third type of risk.

Overall comment on Jiawei's interview

Although Jiawei had not attended any STTP courses or other learning programmes, she showed a strong desire to participate in learning in the future. This desire was heavily driven by her work, to improve her work performance, to complement certain skills and knowledge she had not studied before, and to fulfil her interests. While having to admit the role of qualifications in employment in general, Jiawei held a strongly technocratic view in terms of learning and the value of learning. (As long as she made an effort, her skills and knowledge would be improved. Again, working hard and studying hard was taken by her as a form of secure strategy.)

-- Zhijian

Zhijian graduated from an elite university in Beijing and held a master's degree in computer science. He currently worked in a private computing company in Shanghai. He found people who were in their late twenties or early thirties could be his potential competitors. To maintain his advantages or secure his position in the company or more broadly in the labour market, Zhijian believed the essential way was '*continuous learning*'. Learning was viewed by Zhijian as a process of growing up. '*As long as we continue learning and progressing, there would be hope and light in us. ... This*

learning process is not necessarily linked with competing with others. It was a matter of self-ability and self-quality improvement.'

Reasons for his non-participation

Zhijian had heard only a little about the STTP programme and had never attended any courses. He suggested two reasons for this. First, after graduating from an elite university, Zhijian had no interest in participating in any computer science related education and training course. Identifying himself as an elite university graduate, he was confident and valued the skills and knowledge gained in the university studies as being the best. In contrast, the computer science course provided in STTP was seen to be designed for non-computer major students. Second, there were various learning opportunities embedded in our work and life, such as on-the-job training and self-learning. Zhijian was also confident about his self-learning abilities and so it was not necessary for him to take computer science courses in STTP. Nonetheless, Zhijian stated his intention to join the STTP programme, but probably only to take the management courses. Currently, Zhijian's work included a significant amount of management, but he had no theoretical knowledge in this field. His intention was also partly driven by his interest. Despite practical experience of management, Zhijian wants 'theoretical knowledge'. This differs from those who criticized the value of theoretical knowledge compared with work experience.

Talking about the learning cost and return, Zhijian stated that they were impossible to calculate. *'I would not think too much about this issue [learning cost and benefit]. It is impossible to think or predict that your investment of RMB2000 in one training course would immediately generate a profit of RMB20000. Learning or learning outcome can be invisible.'* Zhijian considered calculating the learning cost was not necessary as learning was good anyway.

Views on and experience of lifelong learning in general

Zhijian gave three accounts of lifelong learning. First, due to technological transformation, knowledge needed to be updated from time to time. People would be confronted with various new situations and obstacles in real life; the knowledge learnt from schools and universities might not be sufficient to engage effectively with these situations or overcome these obstacles. Here, Zhijian used his experience as an example:

'The world is changing so fast. For example, the field of computer science has experienced several substantial changes since my graduation from the university ten years ago. I guess the social and economic development may be even faster. Thus, the notion of lifelong learning captures this change trend. If we do not continue to learn, we will be left behind. The definition of 'illiterate' has changed from lack of literacy and numeracy to lack of basic computer science, like how to use a computer and how to go on the internet. To me, lifelong learning is a process for self-learning and self-change.'

Second, Zhijian also mentioned that due to the fierce labour market competition, lifelong learning could be taken as a way to equip oneself with updated skills and knowledge, to develop and improve oneself, and ultimately to ensure oneself a secure position in the employment competition. Thirdly, he considered learning at the University for the Third Age was considered as a significant form of lifelong learning. Those retired people chose to learn according to their interests, rather than for any other employment-related reasons.

According to these three accounts, Zhijian commented that the STTP programme could only be thought of as a part of lifelong learning, as it could fit into the first two categories of learning, but is still quite far away from the idea of learning for one's interests. Again, Zhijian articulated the concept of learning for instrumental reasons with learning in STTP.

Overall comments on Zhijian's interview

Zhijian's opinion was mediated by a strong technocratic view. He believed that continuing to learn could be considered as a kind of personal skill, as learning was a way of self-improvement. At the same time, however, it is interesting to see Zhijian add that *'not every one can keep on learning. Whoever could persist to do so would be the ultimate winner'*. It can be argued here that this special personal skill was employed as a kind of positional good. Once someone could achieve it, this person would stand out of the crowd.

During the interview, Zhijian did not forget to recognize or identify himself as an elite university graduate. His previous learning experience offered him an advantageous position, in terms of the levels of skills and knowledge learnt developed in his study experience in the elite university. His elite university graduate identity had an influence on his participation in lifelong learning in general.

6.4 Discussion

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this research to investigate individual perceptions on education and training in this era of late modernity in Shanghai. The quantitative data revealed a partial description of individuals' perceptions on learning participation. And the learning stories of both participants and non-participants enabled us to explore and understand the relationship between learning and agency behind the quantitative picture, both in relation to individuals' making sense of self and in relation to wider societal transformations, as Biesta and Tedder (2006) suggest. Both sets of data indicate that individual choices and decisions to engage in lifelong learning and STTP in particular were multi-factorial, based on a diversified mixture of instrumental and non-instrumental intentions. These learning decisions and choices were also contingent on other life episodes, and were structuring and structured by a wider set of values and socio-economic factors. In other words, individuals' engagement in lifelong learning could be seen as a reflexive negotiation of self and that aspect of the social lived world consisting of activities in the labour market.

De Weerdt *et al.* (2002) conceptualize their model of developing learner identity and argue that the learning trajectory is a continuous process, defined by three moments: orientation, elaboration and integration. From the research findings presented here, the learners' participation (or even non-participation) in the STTP courses can be divided into three stages: their awareness of learning needs, their choices of and engagement in this particular programme or/and other education and training, and their reflection on future learning needs. The following discussion will be conducted and structured by using the model of three learning moments from De Weerdt *et al.* (2002).

6.5 Individuals' awareness of learning needs for STTP and lifelong learning

The research shows that the interviewees, whether the STTP participants or non-participants, recognized the need to assume responsibility for their own learning and attempted to do so. Not only did they recognize the structural changes taking place and their subsequent effects, but also they were able to analyze their position in the societal 'frame of reference' and identified their personal learning needs. Findings from both the questionnaires and the narratives of individuals' learning experiences indicate that multi-factorial motivations drove participation in lifelong learning. Individuals' learning was theorized by themselves with working theories reflecting human capital and positional competition approaches. At the same time, their decisions were also mediated by cultural values. These three elements were not readily separable in analyzing and understanding individuals' learning stories. Employment-related motivations were embedded and dominated in the data.

6.5.1 Learning for new skills and knowledge

One of the most important motivations for lifelong learning reported by the respondents was to develop, improve and update their skills and knowledge in the workplace. There were two main forces behind this. First, new skills and knowledge emerging through the socio-economic development in Shanghai are recognized as one of these driving forces. The emergence of new industries, associated with technological innovation, has resulted in a strong demand for highly skilled workers in specific fields. For example, the respondents particularly exemplified that the new industries of logistics, exposition design and management have emerged and developed considerably in the Shanghai labour market. Also, as the city development lays emphasis on service industries, especially in the field of finance and investment, there has been an increase in employment in the financial sector. Both the employee and the employer respondents mentioned that the expansion of the financial sector also involves investment from and cooperation with foreign countries; not only do employees need to grasp knowledge of the Chinese system, but also they need to obtain knowledge of the foreign system and to learn skills to deal with customers from various countries. In addition, foreign language proficiency is required, especially English. Accordingly, challenges are caused by the fact that the knowledge and skills previously acquired by employees become inadequate

or obsolete to meet the human capital demand of the accelerated socio-economic development.

Employees and prospective employees may have obtained significant amounts of knowledge and skills through formal schooling. Moreover, the Shanghai government has continued to expand and enrich formal education and training so as to develop the needed human capital (Xiao, 2002). Curriculum reforms and innovations have also been undertaken to cater for the new job-related knowledge and skills. However, changes in the work place tend to outpace changes in formal schooling. Accordingly, the municipal government has identified that there is a discrepancy between the current and the desired levels of human capital (*ibid*). Therefore, lifelong learning serves a purpose to supplement formal education and training. From the perspective of the government, lifelong learning is for the purpose of fostering a skilled workforce and reducing the gap in human resources in Shanghai. From the learners' perspective, lifelong learning offers a chance for individuals to develop and improve their skills and knowledge. The research findings indicates that individuals, not only the working respondents but also student respondents, were highly aware of the changes in the workplace and had a good knowledge of what sorts of knowledge and skills were required in the labour market. Individuals tended to obtain this information through their own experience in the labour market and through media, family and friends.

From the respondents' perspective, the second force behind this skills and knowledge demand is related to the characteristics of Chinese education and training. Recognizing that the knowledge gained from formal education is likely to be insufficient for the demands of the labour market, individuals also pointed out that the learning and teaching styles in the Chinese formal schooling were not helpful in promoting, indeed may have undermined, their knowledge and skills development, especially in relation to the new job-related and employment-required knowledge, skills and attitude/values. Theory-laden teaching and rote learning at universities were perceived to create a gap between what students learn in formal education and what they experience, or expect to experience, in the real world of work. In other words, individuals noted that their employability might not meet the requirements of the labour market. Under this circumstance, individuals were motivated to participate in education and training

outside or after their formal education, in order to upgrade and update their knowledge and skills.

The research data suggest that there was little difference between student and working respondents in terms of their learning motivation that derived from recognition of the need for new skills in the workplace. Student respondents were largely driven by their realization of insufficient and inappropriate knowledge gained from universities; while working respondents found their knowledge and skills obtained from work experience was also inadequate to cope with accelerating and increasing changes at work. Compared with the student respondents' experience, the working respondents continually identified their learning needs at work, reflecting the continuous process nature of the learning trajectory as described by De Weerd, *et al* (2002).

6.5.2 Learning for qualifications

From both the questionnaire and the interview findings, gaining an extra certificate was seen as another important factor which motivated individuals to participate in STTP. The main consideration was that qualification is seen as a pre-requisite for employment. The two main driving forces behind this were higher education expansion and policy regulations on certifying vocational skills and knowledge.

First, as discussed in the previous chapter, higher education expansion promotes credential inflation and leads people to realize that to stand out in the employment competition, they should obtain as many qualifications as possible and as high a degree as possible. However, the rate of higher education expansion in China is outstandingly high at all levels of degrees, bachelor degrees and master's degrees in particular. One consequence is that not only bachelor degrees but also master's degrees are devalued. The respondents were highly aware that individuals might not succeed in the employment competition even if they had the right qualification; however, without the qualification, they would certainly fail or be disqualified from the competition in the first place.

Also, in the Chinese higher education system, students are required to gain certain vocation-related certificates during their university studies, as part of the curriculum. For example, in addition to accomplishing mandatory courses, non-English major

students are required to gain CET 6 while English major students are required to gain TEM 8²² before their graduation. Some computer skill certificates are also part of the requirements for graduation. Paralleling the credential inflation of university degrees, these skill certificates have also become devalued in the labour market. Individuals need to find extra qualifications to obtain; gaining qualifications becomes a motivation for learning, as Dore describes (1976). Therefore, qualifications, as means-to-end products of learning and as gateways to jobs, might indicate that lifelong learning is simply a lifelong process of collecting qualifications (Young, 1998). STTP, as an extra qualification, and particularly as one issued by the government, becomes one choice for learners' collections.

Secondly, some of the interviewees' participation in STTP was partly constrained by work-related policies and regulations. In 2003, the central government established a policy on credentializing vocational knowledge and skills, as a way '*to develop the human resource accumulation in China and to promote and deepen the labour market construction and reform*' (source from <http://www.coci.org.cn>). The Shanghai municipal government implemented this policy as 'Shanghai vocational position qualification' ('*Shanghai zhiye gangwei zhengshu*') and integrated it into the development of the STTP programme. Certain courses in STTP were taken as part of the policy implementation, such as logistics and accounting. The working interviewees, due to their position, were required to obtain the relevant certificates.

However, the function of qualifications to certify specific skills and knowledge and skills was in doubt, according to the interviewees. This was attributed to the nature and features of the assessment system in Chinese education. To the interviewees, the assessments in Chinese education have some severe disadvantages. These include problems with orientation, such as being too academic, too theoretical and having little association with the world of practice; with content, such as a requirement for a great deal of reciting and remembering items; and with format, such as no practical work is given credit (Lewin and Wang, 1990). In other words, passing an exam did not necessarily mean that a person has mastered certain knowledge or skills, but rather has

²² TEM 8: Test for English Major, band 8. Test for English Major is also an academic test aiming at testing for English major students' English proficiency. The status of TEM 8 shows its holder's English is much higher proficient than other certificates, such as CET 4 and 6.

the ability to deal with exams or recall theories. This tends to undermine the role of a qualification as certifying that certain standards have been achieved.

Nevertheless, constrained by the selection role of qualifications in society and the impact of higher education expansion and devalued credentials, individuals were motivated or even felt forced to engage in lifelong learning and to collect extra qualifications. This could be considered as a shift from the original meaning of lifelong learning in Chinese society. Learning in a Chinese context, no matter what a person learns, is supposed to be good for this person's self-fulfillment and is supposed to have moral value in showing this person's diligence.

The research data also suggest that people in different social positions were influenced or motivated by the selection role of qualification differently. Students, younger people and those with non-top university degrees tended to participate in lifelong learning more for the purpose of gaining extra qualifications. Student respondents realized that their lack of work experience, compared with the working counterparts, might disadvantage them in the employment competition. People from non-top universities saw their potential disadvantage in public perceptions that their degrees are of lower quality or prestige. Under these circumstances, engaging in more learning and obtaining more certificates is adopted as a strategy to improve their standing in the competition.

However, it is important to note that there is a tension between motivation driven by extra learning for skill development and the motivation driven by the need to gain certificates only without necessarily thinking about the skills and knowledge involved. It is not possible to divide individual learners into those who engage with a working theory akin to human capital theory and those who are driven by positional competition. Both positions are clearly held by each individual and are manifested in their choice of action.

6.5.3 'Learning is always good' as a cultural value

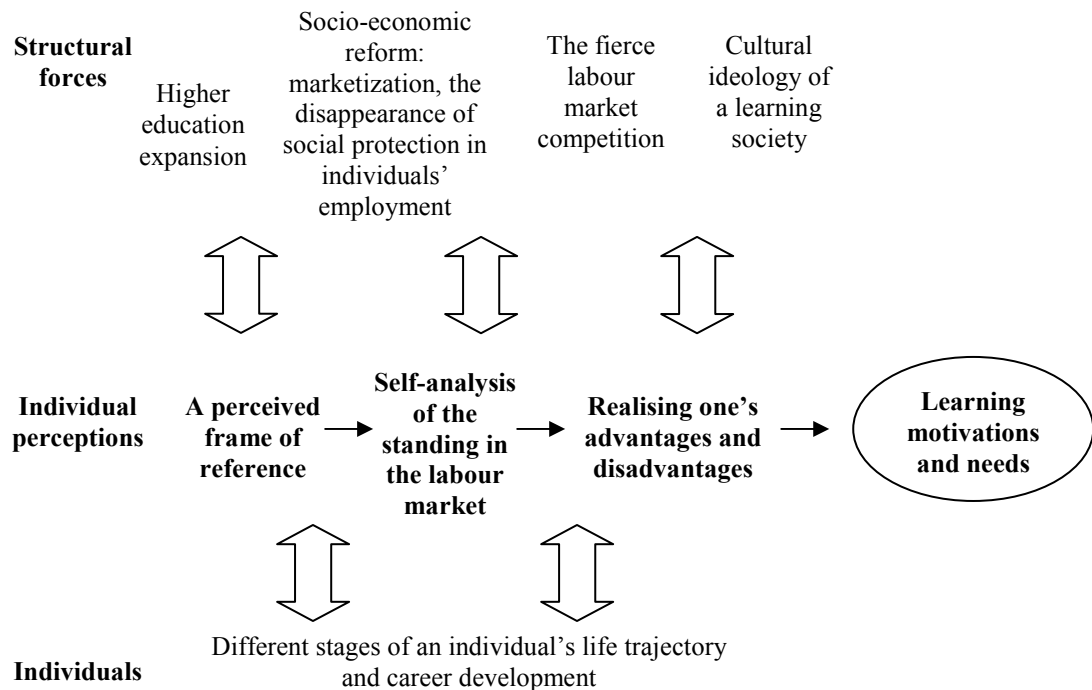
The data suggest that strong cultural influences were embedded in people's decision-making to participate in learning. Individuals believe that the narrow-sense of instrumental learning can not be considered as lifelong learning and learning is good, no matter what the learning result will be. This was taken as 'a natural attitude' by the

interviewees. Individuals are aware of the increasing uncertainties they are confronted with in society, such as the new labour market mechanisms and the new skills demanded. These risks and changes make life increasingly uncertain. This 'natural' attitude is deeply rooted in individuals' minds, as they have grown up in a society which emphasizes 'learning makes a good person' as a robust reliable rule, but it is interesting to note the way the interviewees talked about it. The cultural value of learning was not mentioned as the first and foremost reason when they explained their learning motivations. Rather, only when they were not so sure about the learning result in terms of educational investment and return did the interviewees start to say 'learning is good anyway'. Even though an individual may fail an exam or to obtain a qualification, a positive result for learning is presumed and taken for granted here. Under this circumstance, learning was seen as a source of ontological security in the rapidly changing world of work (Giddens, 1992; Gallacher, *et al.*, 2002).

6.5.4 A brief summary: learning needs, self-evaluation and self-reflection

In the individual learning stories, both the course participant and non-participant interviewees showed their awareness, thoughts and desires towards engaging in learning, mainly for the purposes of skills and knowledge development, qualification achievement and under certain cultural influences. Apart from these three general motivations, the findings also suggest that learners' identification of their learning needs and motivations can be seen as a product of making sense of the self in a rapidly changing and uncertain society. All the interviewees were highly aware of the structural changes taking place in society, such as higher education expansion, the fierce labour market competition and socio-economic reform in general. As argued in the previous chapter, these structural forces and changes formed a 'frame of reference' in the interviewees' minds. Individuals tried to fit themselves into this frame of reference and to understand their standing in the uncertain labour market. Through an analysis of their position, they would identify what advantages and disadvantages they might have; and accordingly design learning strategies to build and improve their (both absolute and relative forms of) employability, combining this with their understanding of cultures and values. In brief, in order to understand learning motivations, we must be cognizant of and integrate into our analysis a range of factors, such as individuals' personal values and expectations of a particular outcome and other driving and constraining forces (Ahl, 2006). (See Figure 6.5.4)

Figure 6.5.4 Individuals' learning needs and motivations



From both the quantitative and qualitative data in this research, it can be argued that the particular stage or extent of experience of one's life trajectory and career development exerts influence on individuals' motivations to participate in lifelong learning. For example, generally speaking, the student respondents and interviewees who were at the point of transition from formal education to the labour market competition tended to be more driven by instrumental and explicitly credentialist motives, as a way to make up for their lack of work experience. Their working counterpart respondents and interviewees, however, were more relaxed and considered learning more as a way to improve their skills. In relation to their perception of the labour market, the student interviewees felt panic about the uncertainty and had not fully experienced or encountered the competition. Collecting qualifications could be seen as a secure form of improving their standing in the competition. However, those working interviewees showed their better understanding and knowledge of the rules in the labour market competition. They found skills and knowledge were to the fore and the most important element in constituting one's competitiveness and employability. Although career-related objectives remained of importance in their learning participation, the working interviewees were motivated to a greater extent by the perceived intrinsic value of

lifelong learning in terms of skill and knowledge improvement and personal development.

In terms of an analysis based on different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), we observe that even within the same group, different individuals might possess different forms of capital, in different amounts, which might affect their learning motivations and aspirations. Those student interviewees who thought themselves to be in a relatively advantaged position, such as those graduating from an elite university (Yijin and Xinqi), saw lifelong learning as a choice of their interests or self-development to improve their skills and knowledge. For example, Xinqi studied Spanish purely for his interest; and his non-participation in STTP was attributed to his confidence in the reputation of the elite university degree in accounting. To them, an elite university degree meant certain protection, since they had received a superior education and therefore possessed greater employability in terms of skills and knowledge. In contrast, those student interviewees from non-elite universities (such as Tangyue and Shushu) certainly viewed themselves as being in a relatively disadvantaged position in the labour market competition. Lacking work experience too, they found lifelong learning to be essential to gather more certificates, so as to make up their shortfall in employability. In other words, participation in further learning might be not so much a choice for them, but a survival strategy. The working respondents and interviewees mainly engaged in learning for the purpose of skills and knowledge development, but reading through the data, it is not difficult to find differences within this group. The interviewees who were at a more secure or senior management level expressed their belief in learning as self-improvement. In contrast, the interviewees with lower cultural or educational capital and at a lower position in employment (such as Xiawei and Liying) showed their concern over changes and effects caused by higher education expansion. Seeing more and more university graduates in the labour market, Xiawei and Liying felt increasingly at risk as their college degree might put them at a disadvantage. Despite their knowledge and experience at work, they had a strong desire to collect more qualification to strengthen their personal capital.

This discussion illustrates that an individual's choices related to learning options and behaviour are made in a nexus of social forces and the possibilities of individual agency. Individuals encounter different social situations or realities which will affect their action

differently; therefore, personal difference should be taken into account in understanding individuals' participation in learning (Ahl, 2006). Furthermore, people at different stages of life trajectory and career development may hold different forms and amounts of capital, - economic, cultural and social -, which they utilize to attain different social and economic positions and accordingly different life experiences. How a person perceives the learning depends on what she has experienced and how she perceives and understands the experience (ibid). In other words, the factors influencing the interviewees' motivation came from their schooling and work experience and from their evaluation and reflection of their standing in the labour market. This learning awareness and these learning desires became part of their life and part of their identity.

6.6 Individuals' choice of the STTP programme

In the previous section, the research data revealed that multiple factors, both structural and individual, influenced choices and decisions to participate in lifelong learning. The identification of learning needs was inextricably tied up with socio-economic contexts and individual life stage. The research also suggests that, after identifying their learning motivations and goals, the individual learners may adopt consumer-like behaviour to some extent when enrolling in the STTP courses rather than other adult learning programmes available in the education and training market in Shanghai. This section will discuss the factors and reasons taken into consideration when the respondents chose the STTP courses to attend.

6.6.1 The considerations of course quality

Both the questionnaire and the interview fieldwork findings indicated that the STTP courses' quality attraction perceived by the respondents derived from five aspects, namely, its course content, its course structure, its qualification, the popularity of the programme and teaching resource.

-- Course content

The skills and knowledge delivered in the STTP courses were seen as an indicator of quality. The continuously updated course content and the continuous development of new courses attracted participants. As the economy has progressed in Shanghai, new industries have emerged, along with new knowledge and skills requirements. However,

formal higher education and vocational education and training might not be able to update or provide relevant courses at an adequate rate (due to the less flexible education system in China). This view is both supported by literature (Xiao, 2002 and 2003) and identified by the respondents. Therefore, students might not be prepared with updated knowledge and skills to deal with the new types of jobs and skill demands. Also, STTP provided extra venue for people to update and develop their skills and knowledge apart from on-the-job training at their work place. In this sense, the STTP courses were perceived as an educational resource to update one's skills and knowledge, to meet the skill demand.

Apart from its attraction of updated skills and knowledge, the interviewees perceived that the skills and knowledge delivered in the course were specially designed for the Shanghai context. For example, the interpretation courses were largely related to topics on the socio-economic development in Shanghai; the accounting courses involved lots of local policy study with a comparison to other contexts, nationally and internationally. To some extent, the specific Shanghai related content made the STTP courses stand out from other learning programmes. To those who would like to develop their career in Shanghai, the STTP courses were considered as a critical resource to improve their professional knowledge in relation to this particular locality.

The interviews with the policy-makers revealed that with the further development of the STTP programme, more courses, providing different kinds and depths of skills and knowledge were being designed and promoted. This diversity of courses appeals to people with different reasons for engaging with some form of lifelong learning. This point was echoed among the participant interviewees. For example, working in a Sino-American company, Yijing identified the demand for English language skills at work. However, his job as a computer engineer meant to him that the language skills required at work would not be as high as those of a professional interpreter. Hence, he chose the middle level of the interpretation course.

-- Course structure in terms of training and assessment systems

The flexible system of course structure and organization was another attraction to the learners. First, the training and assessment in STTP were organized separately by different institutions. Learners were free to make the decision based on their needs

whether to take part in training, or assessment, or both. For example, Hanfei majored in English language in her university studies. Her university course involved interpretation training similar to that of the STTP course, so she only needed to take part in the assessment for the purpose of gaining the qualification. Hence, the flexible system of training and organization enables the learner to plan and organize their learning according to their own learning situations.

In line with the flexibility of the STTP course organization, the interviewees, largely the student interviewees, maintained that most of the courses in STTP usually held exams twice a year, making access to assessment more flexible, for those who were interested in taking part in training. This provided individuals with greater opportunities and more freedom to arrange their personal timetables. In other words, participants could plan when to attend the training, so as to obtain the certificate by a certain time and to assist their employability construction. It also brought more chances for those who had failed in the previous exams to re-sit them. The flexibility opens up opportunities for individuals to access to educational resources and to a certain extent increase individuals' powers of agency to make choice on learning. In turn, individuals had to be ever more self-responsible for their learning management.

-- The qualification offered

The qualifications offered in STTP were seen as an attraction to the participants, especially to the students. In the context of higher education expansion, the STTP certificates were regarded as a supplement to university degrees that would help to protect their holders from being eliminated in the first-round of employment competition. Again, both the student and employee interviewees did not see the certificates as necessarily representing the holders' skills and knowledge. Rather, they took the qualification as an indicator of other personal attributes, notably the holders' learning desire, hard-work and self-organization.

The interviewees, were however aware that, just as their university degrees were suffering from credential inflation, STTP qualifications were likely to suffer the same fate as a result of their popularity, which, ironically, was a driving force behind participation.

-- The popularity of the programme

Another reason that the interviewees chose the STTP courses was their public popularity. People found the STTP courses were very popular among their peers and felt they would be left out or left behind if they did not participate. They also agreed that the high popularity of the courses to some extent indicated their quality in terms of course content and the qualification provided. However, it is also interesting to note that the same interviewees were aware and concerned that the greater the number of people attending the course and obtaining the qualifications, the less valuable that qualification became. This contradiction between their attending the STTP training and their concerns over the potentially devalued qualifications can be viewed as a 'structural trap'. Their consideration of the structural trap also echoes with the previous chapter's finding that individuals were highly aware of the importance of attaining comparative advantages to be ahead in the competition. These thoughts of participating in STTP show that individuals' learning aspirations are not totally culturally determined. Their belief in the intrinsic value of education and training were reduced by their considerations of obtaining comparative advantages.

-- Teaching resource

In terms of choosing a specific institution to attend the course, teaching resource was one of the factor influencing individuals' learning plan, although it was not picked out in any of the interview accounts. Under the marketized mechanism, higher education institutions, as well as private institutions, were entitled to deliver the STTP courses. As mentioned in Chapter 1, professors and experts from those higher education institutions were involved in designing the curriculum and the assessment. Meanwhile, they could also participate in delivering the course. Again, under this market system, learners were attracted by those experts' reputation and therefore chose the institutions where they teach. They felt 'safe' as these experts would teach and deliver the skills and knowledge required in the assessments. By taking their classes, the students' chances to pass the assessment and obtain the certificates were increased. Here another hidden issue emerges, although it was not mentioned in the interviews. As an earlier observation from my own experience in studying one of the STTP programme, these institutions in which the course designers delivered the courses usually charged higher tuition fee, compared to other institutions. We can argue that there might be a potential problem

that the chance to sit in the experts' and course designers' classes and in turn obtain the certificates could be limited to those who could afford the higher financial costs.

6.6.2 The consideration of learning costs (but not benefit)

The participants took learning cost and benefit into consideration in making their decision to participate in the STTP courses. However, these concepts were used by them in a limited financial way. The different types of cost mentioned are spending on tuition fees, learning materials and transportation, and the loss of time as direct costs; possible wage loss as an opportunity cost; and the loss of all the money and time spent if the qualifications could not be obtained as sunk cost. The participants' awareness of these concepts of learning costs was revealed in the interview data, but they did not necessarily carry out a clear calculation in the same currency evaluation. Also, rather than seeing learning benefit as a form of straightforward financial return, the participants linked it to the intrinsic value of education and training in the Chinese context, -- learning will do you good anyway --, which was pointed out by all the respondents in the interviews. To some extent, it is not necessary for the learners to consider and calculate the return to learning.

-- Direct costs: money and time

The questionnaire shows that the respondents gave considerable consideration to the direct costs, such as loss of leisure time (76.5%), cost of tuition fee, learning materials and equipment (65.7%) and travel cost (64.3%). However, the course participant interviewees did not place much emphasis on these types of costs, as explained by their deeply-rooted ideas and thinking on the intrinsic value of education and training. They considered education and training to have a positive return, no matter how much financial or time cost was paid. From the non-participant interviewees' perspective, time or heavy work load was more of a barrier which prevented them from taking part in the course than the direct cost levels.

-- Opportunity cost

Only 14.6% of the questionnaire respondents considered 'loss of possible wage' as a kind of learning costs. This is also echoed in the views of the participant interviewees. They understood and realized there would be a trade-off, in terms of money and time, between studying the STTP courses and doing alternative activities. But, based on their

firm belief in the positive return to education and training, the participant interviewees thought the opportunity cost of studying would be smaller than those of ‘playing’.

-- *Sunk cost*

Sunk cost was raised by the researcher in the questionnaire fieldwork. 40% of all the respondents declared they had considered this type of learning cost; that is, they would lose everything if they failed in gaining the STTP qualifications. However, this view did not emerge strongly in the interviews. Instead, the interviewees generally pointed out what they learned from STTP might be or might not be applied in their work, but it would not be seen as a waste. The interview data suggests that the participants thought about the possibility of failing, but again the deep-rooted belief in the intrinsic value of learning reduced their consideration of sunk cost.

-- *Marginal cost*

Marginal costs did not appear in the questionnaire, but the interviewees mentioned it. In economic terms, marginal cost and benefits means the change in the total cost and profit which results from the sale of an additional unit. Here, the marginal cost and benefit were identified particularly by those participants in the English interpretation courses. From their points of view, the marginal cost was relatively small for a student who majored in language studies in his or her university studies. Those who have already engaged in similar study courses in universities would already have some skills and knowledge, which would save their time in STTP and would also improve their chances of obtaining the STTP qualifications. In this way, their engagement with STTP reflects an efficient use of resources. This might not be the case for science students, for example, since they are likely to have a weaker base in English. They are likely, therefore, to spend more time mastering the current content, compared with their counterparts. The interviewees also emphasized the intensive nature of the courses. The duration of the course and the assessment was relatively short, which reduced the cost in terms of time. In turn, it reduced the marginal cost of learning in STTP.

6.6.3 A rational choice?

Looking into the questionnaire data and the interviews, it is not difficult to find that the individual learners, as knowledgeable agents, had an understanding of the learning opportunities available in the Shanghai education and training market. Based on their

self-identification of learning needs, they made their choice whether to attend the STTP courses in line with their market-related criteria, such as the perceived quality and the tuition fee in relation to whether they can afford it or not. However, it is also not difficult to find that rational choice theory does not offer adequate explanatory power in understanding individuals' participation and non-participation in the STTP programme.

On the assumptions of the strong version of rational choice theory, individual learners would collect sufficient information of the learning opportunities, evaluate these different options and make their logical and rational choice based on the information they have and under the principle of maximizing profit (Scottish Funding Council, 2007). This research finds that the individual learners, both the STTP course participants and non-participants, showed their awareness of learning opportunities in the adult education market in Shanghai. They had a good knowledge of what different courses and programmes were available, who were the course providers, what course content and qualification they would obtain. As shown in the previous sections, the learners also took into consideration how the course content, its course structure and its qualifications matched their learning goals and needs. They believed the work- and/or study-related course content in STTP would help them to improve their performance; and the qualification would reinforce their employability construction and in turn increase their life chances in the labour market competition. Awareness of benefits may be somewhat vague and even rather uncertain, but here we have behaviour aimed at maximizing benefits that may accrue by strategic planning and careful timing of participation. From these perspectives, it can be argued that individuals' choice and participation in STTP is rational, in the sense employed in the generic rational choice theory.

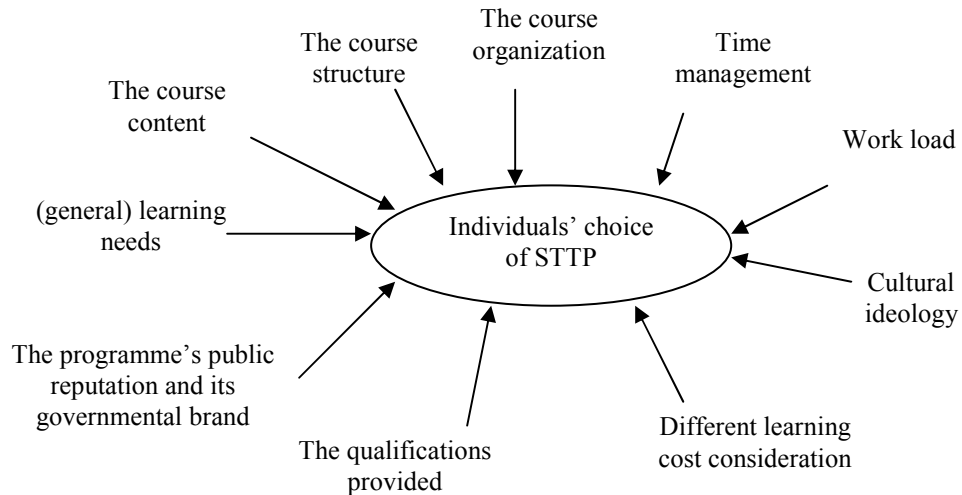
However, there are also elements which do not fit with strong-version rational choice theory's interpretation of 'rational'. First, the individuals, especially the course participants, held pre-existing cultural beliefs and attitudes towards learning and education. Immersed in Chinese culture – sometimes with an explicit awareness, sometimes subconsciously --, the interviewees believed that regardless of the learning result, achieving the qualifications or obtaining the work-related skills, learning makes a good person and is good for self-development. In other words, an intrinsic value of education is still recognized by individuals.

The second illustration of ‘non-rational’ thinking can be viewed as their positional consideration and their consumption demand for education. The research evidence shows that some people ‘joined the bandwagon’ as their participation in STTP was positively influenced by the number of other consumers ‘purchasing’ this educational commodity, its advertised reputation and its governmental brand (Adnett and Davies, 2002). Moreover, both some of the participants and the non-participants were very much aware of the possible ‘negative externality’ (*ibid*), that is, that the value of these educational goods might decrease when more people possessed them. All this thinking was driven by their awareness of the importance of relative standing in consumer behaviour. In addition, they also worried about losing their standing in the labour market competition, which might be caused by their non-participation. It is worth mentioning that the individuals realized the non-rationality of ‘the Veblen’ and ‘bandwagon’ effects of participating in STTP. However, in this context they would explain their action by reiterating the value of education in terms of their enjoyment and the potential exchange of life chances in the labour market. In other words, participating in STTP was seen as a positive-sum game more than a zero-sum game. Third, the research data shows that the individuals’ choice of STTP was also challenged by other structural barriers, such as the working people’s busy schedule and heavy workload restricting their participation.

In sum, a ‘strong’ version of rational choice theory is challenged as an explanation of individuals’ participation in STTP. Rather than being ‘perfectly rational’, the individuals took their own situation into consideration and negotiated with the external situation in which they were located. Specifically, the individuals evaluated these different educational opportunities in line with their learning needs, their interests, their financial situation, their time management, so as to obtain the educational commodity that would maximally enhance their employability and their life chances in employment. At the same time, the individual action is integrated with elements of cultural ideology, i.e. Chinese cultural influences in this research. For example, the individuals discursively recognized the value of education for self-development. A rational choice theory modified in a framework of cultural influence is closer to a weak version of rational choice theory. It enables us to explain and understand individuals’ learning management – how the learners used available information to choose STTP courses

from the alternative learning sources, so as to reach their personal goals (see Figure 6.6.3).

Figure 6.6.3 Factors or elements influencing the individuals' choices on STTP



6.7 Reflection and further learning needs

The formation of learner identity is an ongoing process (Billett, 2006). This research shows that this process of building identity continued after the individuals' participation or non-participation in the STTP programme. Their personal experience in the courses and assessment informed their comments on the quality of this localized education and training programme. Also, their reflections and opinions on STTP were simultaneously influenced by and interacted with other factors and forces, such as individual experience in other education and training and their experience in the labour market competition and employment. All these experiences enabled them to know more about the STTP programme, to reflect on their initial learning needs, and in turn to identify their further learning motivation and develop their views on the value of learning. This interaction between the learners themselves and the society in which they are located can be viewed as the third stage of the learning trajectory: the moment of integrating their learning experience in different social settings.

Compared with the positive nature of motivations and choices on participating in the STTP training, the interviewees' reflections and comments on their STTP experience appeared to be rather mixed with fewer positive and more negative views. On the one

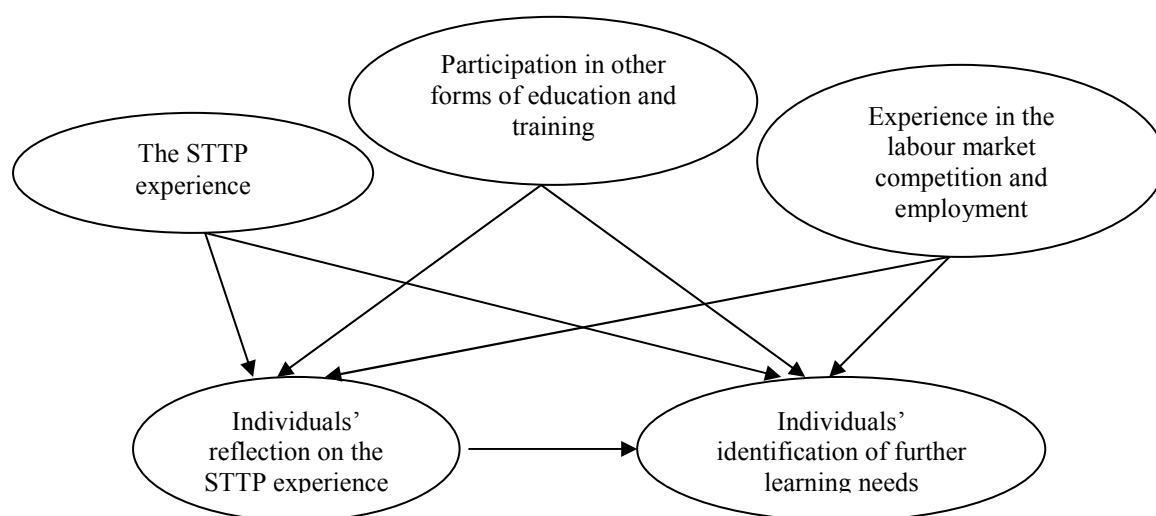
hand, some participant interviewees found their knowledge and skills had been improved to a certain extent, or they identified their knowledge gap through the course and hence their further learning goals. Also, their experience in seeking employment and in the labour market competition confirmed for them the recognized 'reputational' value of the STTP qualifications. The interviewees cited these as the benefits from their STTP experience. It is worth remembering that the non-participants also reflected on their employment experience and gained knowledge and information about the STTP programme. Assessing their work and personal situation, they took the STTP courses into consideration as a possible further learning plan and rejected or deferred participation, similarly illustrating their reflection on their life experience.

On the other hand, however, there seemed to be more negative reflections, in terms of the quality of the courses and qualifications. First, in spite of the updated knowledge and skills delivered in the courses, some participants argued the assessment system or the way in which the assessment was designed and organized undermined the course quality and the 'substantial' value of the qualifications. They found that the assessments were largely based on the textbooks. What was assessed was the students' ability to remember and recite the textbooks and lectures, which was no different from their full-time education experience. In this sense, the validity of the assessment was in doubt, and in turn the value and the role of its qualifications was brought into question. This opinion was reinforced by the interviewees' experience in other forms of education and training, such as summer school in certain higher education institutions, on-the-job training and the experience of studying abroad. The different teaching and learning styles in these programmes refreshed the interviewees' mind on learning and caused them to reflect on their STTP experience. Second, the interviewees believed that learning to get a job is instrumental, so that it can not be considered as 'real' learning; but only learning for its intrinsic value would be considered as 'real' or 'superior' learning. The interviewees, through their communication with other peer students, discovered that instrumental motivation dominated the learning, that is, obtaining qualifications to add extra value to their employability package. Although this instrumental reasoning could not be avoided as being forced by the structural factor of higher education expansion, it does not add any 'real' learning credit. The interviewees also found from their STTP experience that the qualification-led training might naturally and inevitably transfer their learning emphasis from knowledge and skills to

assessment. This was evidenced by their observation that some courses involved a large amount of training in how to deal with the exams. In this case, their experience and understanding of STTP learning contradicts their firm belief in learning for its intrinsic value and for personal development. Third, the marketized mechanism of STTP worried the individuals. People were charged a high tuition fee, assessment fee and certificate fee by the providing institutions. These impressions led some interviewees to believe economic profit was the goal of running such courses. For the interviewees, the STTP programme, with its 'poor' assessment organization and the instrumental learning needs, was just ritualistic learning and became a site for selling and buying qualifications, rather than the government's professed orientation of fostering skilled people. With these comments and reflections, the interviewees in general agreed that the STTP programme could only be seen as a vocational education and training, in which only a rather narrow and instrumental interpretation of 'learning' promotes the development of a learning society. It offered people learning opportunities; however, the STTP programme on its own was far away from being lifelong learning.

Based on both their both direct and indirect experience in STTP, their participation in other forms of learning and their experience in employment and workplace, individual views on lifelong learning were altered and extended and their further learning needs and motivations were identified. First, echoing their opinion on the labour market competition which presented in the previous chapter, interviewees stressed that learning substantial knowledge and skills was the most important strategy to develop and reinforce one's employability. Second, in such a competitive society, one had to be self-responsible for one's learning. This notion of self-responsibility involves identifying their learning needs, seeking the right learning opportunities from the sea of education and training programmes, and planning and organising the learning.

Figure 6.7 Identification of further learning needs



In sum, this chapter gives much space and provides some insights into the individuals' experience of participation and non-participation in the STTP programme, with respect to their perceptions and understanding of lifelong learning in the current social conditions. The concept of 'learner identity' is utilized to investigate and analyze the individuals' STTP learning experiences. The data analysis confirmed other research findings that the construction of learner identity is an ongoing process of negotiation and interaction between the lived experience of individual learners and the social world in which they are located (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Allan and Lewis, 2006; Billett, 2006; Stokes and Wyn, 2007). The individual accounts of their management of learning can be referred to the reflexive negotiation of the self. This echoes the findings in Chapter 5 on how individuals reflexively construct their employability in the rapidly changing socio-economic context. To sum up, the STTP learning experience has three special meanings to them: a way of improving skills and knowledge, a way of self-development and a way of obtaining positional goods.

6.8 Comparing the individuals' views, the policy-makers' views and the policy discourse: a mismatch?

At this point, if we refer back to the STTP policy and the lifelong learning policy in Shanghai, it is not difficult to find gaps between the government targets and the individuals' perceptions and experiences of reality.

From the government policy on STTP and lifelong learning, as stated in Chapter 1, a strong sense of an underpinning consensus theory approach can be identified. In other words, the STTP programme is seen as a narrowly-defined form of a functional/instrumental learning model, to develop human capital, to increase economic competitiveness and to promote social inclusion in Shanghai. Although the encouragement of self-directed learning receives some slight attention (see section 1.2.6), the STTP policy discourse largely focuses on what the government would like to achieve for Shanghai as a community²³. In some western countries, such as the UK, the government policies not only focus on lifelong learning as a way to develop national competitiveness, but also posit it as helping individuals resolving the problems of uncertainty and insecurity associated with late modernity even if it does not actually overcome them (Edwards *et al*, 2002). However, in the context of the STTP programme, this autonomous self-centred approach is not explicitly expressed. In this sense, it can be argued that the STTP programme is intended by the Shanghai authorities to create a collective learning culture and to create an expanded stock of human capital for the social and economic transformation of Shanghai. However, this governmental goal does not totally fit with the individuals' perceptions and experiences which were identified in this research.

This research finds that individuals are highly aware of not only the technological and skill demand changes in the labour market but also wider social and economic changes. Individual learning participation indicates a variety of reflexive motivations, rather than being for merely instrumental reasons. The findings, moreover, reveal that the STTP learning and its qualification are widely considered as a positional good. Learning and in particular the qualifications obtained, is seen as a personal good that enhances one's position in the competition for and therefore access to the more desirable jobs. One of the dominant forces behind this is higher education expansion. As more people are obtaining university degrees, students tend to more actively engage in learning and obtaining extra certificates, both in their own professional area and other fields, in order to enhance their employability construction and in turn their standing in the job market. Some learners who had a job took part in the learning due to their self-recognition of the

²³ In July 2007, the STTP official website deliberately introduced and promoted the idea of 'self-directed learning'. The website listed the definition and the aims of 'self-directed learning'. This was written in Chinese, but the origin English term was pointed out at the same time. It can be argued that the idea of 'self-directed learning' was drawn from reference to western countries' learning theories.

relatively lower status degrees they possessed. These people were thinking of the potential threat of being laid off as so many young university students were out in the labour market.

This point was confirmed in interviews with the policy makers. On the one hand, they pointed out that the development of STTP was heavily underpinned by a human capital approach to improve the city's socio-economic performance. They also expressed their concerns about the rote-learning and theory-laden Chinese education and training, especially in the higher education sector, and pointed out that the STTP courses were designed as complementary to formal degree education to enrich people's practical skills and knowledge. However, on the other hand, they also noticed that the participation patterns in reality distorted STTP's original goals. For example, both the policy maker and the course deliverer interviewees mentioned that the original target students of STTP were working people who were in a similar field of work and those university students who were studying in a similar professional area. In the beginning of the programme, those who were already working were proportionally dominant; while currently university students form the majority and, no matter what their disciplinary field, attend the course to try to get whatever qualifications they can to improve their employability in the labour market. It is also interesting to note that the policy-maker interviewees did not mention any further plans towards clarifying their original goals to develop STTP or encouraging working people's participation. Rather, they showed their helplessness that *'such a phenomenon was mediated by the Confucian ideology of credentialism'* (Chancellor Zhu).

It is important to highlight the mismatch between the policy focus and individualized learning goals (Billett, 2006; Su, 2007). The top-down learning goals set up by the government provide us with a sense of direction on what to learn so as to respond appropriately to the rapid changes taking place in the society. They act as imperatives forced on individuals so as to meet the pre-defined goals. However, as other scholars have argued (Edwards *et al*, 2002; Field, 2006; Billett, 2006; Su, 2007), the current rules of individuals' engagement in learning depend strongly on their own perceptions, needs and intentions. The findings from this research also reveal that individual learning can be seen as a product of reflexive negotiation between the self and social experiences. While the current policies on the STTP programme and lifelong learning in Shanghai

place much attention on what individuals should learn in order to respond to the current changes in the world of work, policy considerations might also need to focus more on individuals' learning intentions, interests and identities, so as to engage and inspire people's participation in learning to a greater extent. This would help to secure a better balance between the government policy and individuals' needs, to provide 'a consideration of learning and transformation', 'to humanize the goals and processes of lifelong learning', as Billett suggests (2006, p.267).

What can these findings and discussions suggest to us in terms of further policy making and implementation? The next and final chapter will combine the two strands of findings on individuals' employability construction and the STTP learning management to present a picture synthesized from the whole research, and in turn provide recommendations to the policy makers and course delivers.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Overview and reflection on the research

The motivation to carry out this research arose from the popularity of the localized education and training programme STTP in Shanghai. This programme has been developed and implemented by the Shanghai government since 1993, for the purpose of meeting identified skills shortages in the local labour market. From the municipal government perspective, it reflects a straightforward human capital approach to support the city's accelerating economic development. Meanwhile, the development of STTP has been accompanied by an emphasis on building a learning society at both a national and a municipal level. However, for people who had completed formal education and were making decisions about whether or not to engage in such an education and training programme, one of the most significant of the many changes that have taken place in China in recent decades is the emergence of a labour market. The disappearance of an employment system based largely on the allocation of a relatively secure job leaves individuals to compete against each other in this newly emerging labour market and to take full personal responsibility for their employment. Other factors, such as higher education expansion and the changing nature of work, have contributed to the ferocity of the competition experienced in the search for employment. In response to this situation, several questions present themselves to me: How do individuals perceive and cope with these changes? How do they engage and manage in the labour market competition and the STTP learning? Are the STTP programme and its qualifications utilized as a way for individuals to obtain a positional good to add to their university degrees and reinforce their holders' competitiveness in the intensive employment competition?

Given these two aspects, the principal aim of this research was to probe and understand individuals' employability construction and their learning management and participation in the STTP programme in a newly marketized and competitive context. This involved an analysis of relational interdependence between socially and culturally derived factors and personal subjective experience in the employment competition and

learning participation and non-participation. It is through the consideration of these relationships that individuals' work and learning can be fully understood (Gorard and Rees, 2002; Billett, 2006).

This research focused on two related strands, that is, how individuals constructed their employability and how they planned their learning in the localized education and the STTP programme. In an attempt to answer these questions, this research also sought messages about the roles of education, training and qualifications in relation to the labour market and the education policy in developing lifelong learning and a learning society in Shanghai. Specific research questions are

- What is the nature of opportunity and competition in the Shanghai labour market from individuals' perspectives?
- What is the nature of STTP, a localized education and training programme, and its qualifications provided in the labour market?
- What are the perceived relationships between education and training, on the one hand, and qualifications, on the other?

This research has focused on 'knowledge workers'. This was partly for pragmatic reasons, to keep the scale of the study manageable, but also because of their significance in the city's future plan of emphasising development in the advanced service sector.

In order to accomplish these purposes, a mixed method approach was adopted. This research involved a variety of sources of data and different analytical approaches, techniques and tools, including secondary data analysis, questionnaires and interviews. These mixed methods served the research purposes well. In the quantitative research phase, the secondary data analysis and the questionnaire fieldwork, as well as the relevant policy investigation of the Shanghai labour market development and lifelong learning, enabled me to obtain an overview of the general features and patterns of participation in STTP and provide a wider descriptive overview of perceptions held by the course participants. The results of the questionnaire show that a variety of factors were perceived by individuals to make up their employability and to motivate their learning participation in STTP. It also shows that people from different social backgrounds tended to have different opinions on the labour market competition and the

experience in STTP while sharing similarities in terms of their views and perceptions on lifelong learning in general. Although the questionnaire data provided a descriptive summary of people's perceptions, it seemed weak in answering, for example, why work experience was thought important in constructing employability to almost all the respondents, while qualifications seemed to have limited impact on those working respondents; or rather, how these different perceptions were formed. However, the questionnaire was useful in identifying and classifying possible themes and foci for further qualitative investigation and to identify a potential interviewee sample.

Semi-structured interviews were employed in the second research phase. The qualitative interview approach allowed me to explore, expand and deepen the understanding of respondents' experiences and thinking on STTP, lifelong learning and the labour market competition, especially in relation to their social backgrounds. Getting closer to the respondents through interviews made it possible for the researcher to understand their social positions, to see how they subjectively identify and locate themselves in society, particularly in relation to employment and education, and ultimately to construe their agentic action in the broader social context. The sample for the interview fieldwork appeared adequate for the claims and discussion made. The interviewees, including the STTP course participants, non-participants and people at the policy-making level, were chosen by combining a purposive sampling and a snowball sampling strategy. In choosing the course participant and non-participant interviewees, individuals' social backgrounds were deliberately taken into consideration, in order to obtain representatives from across the spectrum of social and demographic characteristics identified in the questionnaire data analysis.

Both cross-case analysis and narrative analysis were adopted in this research. The cross-case analysis enabled me to locate distinct themes across interviews, to compare different views from different groups of people and to synthesize separate pictures to answer the research questions. However, this theme-oriented method restricted my understanding of the inter-relationship between people's perceptions of and motivations towards lifelong learning and its qualifications, on the one hand, and their experience of competing in the labour market, on the other. In order to create a holistic picture and understanding of the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives within a

changing socio-historical context, narrative analysis was utilized. It allowed me to organize and connect the respondents' views into a meaningful whole.

Three research limitations are recognized, especially in relation to the questionnaire and interviewee sampling, arising mainly from the researcher's limited social capital in a highly hierarchical system. First, without knowing high-ranking officers in the STTP head office, it was difficult to gain access to a variety of courses. The questionnaire sampling largely consisted of participants in the most popular courses. Second, compared to the course participant and non-participant interviewees, the sampling of policy-makers was rather limited, although this was to some extent ameliorated by the existence of policy documentary data.

Although the different data-sets and research methods helped to improve the reliability of the research findings, this research has only focused on the course participants in the year of 2004-2005. Therefore, a longitudinal study with emphasis on different years' participants could be helpful to further capture the trajectories of their perception changes if there are any. Also, a longitudinal study that follows a group of individuals over an extended period of time could be conducive to examining their changes in perceptions with experience -- in particular, those students as they are in the transition from school/university to enter the labour market.

7.2 Conclusion

This research is based on a localized education and training programme, STTP, in Shanghai. While some findings and analysis might be considered unique to this locality, other implications of STTP and the building of a learning society are more generally applicable to other regions in China and to China as a whole.

7.2.1 Perceptions of the newly emerged labour market and its competition

This study has explored the perceived nature of opportunity and competition in the Shanghai labour market. This research finds that the way individuals perceive and interpret the emerging labour market and manage and construct their employability and competition in it can be considered as a reflexive project to make sense of the self. Theoretically, Giddens' structuration theory and the notions of 'reflexivity' and 'self-

identity' are adopted here to explain and understand the rich interplay between institutional factors and other social forms and individuals' experiences.

The research findings indicate that the novelty of the labour market in China has accentuated the role and awareness of 'risk' in people's lives. Risk implies two meanings: opportunities and uncertainties. All the individuals, both the students and the working respondents are highly aware of the social and economic changes taking place around them in Shanghai and China respectively, such as rapid economic development, marketization, and higher education expansion. On the one hand, these forces are seen to have expanded opportunity in the labour market, both on an individual level and on an industry and company level. For example, it was stated that more people could go to university and improve their personal skills, knowledge and abilities; more job opportunities were created in the market; there was a wider range of choice of employers; more space and freedom was allowed for individuals' and companies' autonomous development.

On the other hand, a more pessimistic view of 'risk' is expressed. The interviewees were highly aware that uncertainties coexist with opportunity and could not be separated or avoided. The introduction of new government policies and social changes were blamed for this relatively new phenomenon. For example, the breaking of the 'iron rice bowl' – the guarantee of employment security – was recognized as one of the more significant changes in society. More specifically, marketization was identified as the factor which has most directly changed people's 'traditional' perception of stable and relatively predictable employment. The marketized economy was considered to be the origin and developmental driving force of the mechanism of 'competition'.

Most of the interviewees commented on the significance of the location of Shanghai, government policy on its economic development and the attractive nature of its current economic boom. Although recognizing the increase in opportunity, the interviewees were aware of and emphasized the intense competition behind this attractive picture; that is, people in this study were competing against each other for the more desirable limited positions available. With the changing requirements of the labour market, have come uncertainties and risks for all. As this socio-economic development was still

underway, almost everyone in this society could be considered as a first-time entrant in this transitional labour market.

Individuals realize that they are standing on their own in the competition, with no one to rely on for information. This makes it difficult to predict outcomes of the competition, adding to a sense of uncertainty about the future. The respondents felt ‘pressured’, ‘complicated’, ‘horrible’, ‘frightening’, ‘cruel’ about the ferocious competition in the labour market. All these social, economic and cultural changes in Shanghai challenge people’s ontological security system and lead to a degree of existential anxiety. This research shows that, before the socio-economic reform in China, a relatively stable and fixed labour allocation system, along with meritocratic system of education and work, assured individuals that as long as they were modest, had the right skills and knowledge for the job, studied hard and worked hard, they would be assured a position at work. If individuals had well-established social networks (*‘guanxi’*), their life chances would be guaranteed to increase. Therefore, before the socio-economic changes took place in China, individuals had a stable view and knowledge of the social reality, informing and assisting their agency. They could construct continuity in their identity, feeling confident and comfortable to plan and take actions to reach their goals.

However, since the socio-economic reform of the 1980s, individuals have found their previous knowledge about the surrounding social and material environments can not assist their action in the unfamiliar changing conditions. This in turn impacts on individual identity, if not threatening the coherence of their self-identity. For example, the individuals in this study found that under the higher education expansion, merely having a university degree would not guarantee access to a good job. Without a degree, however, individuals would not even be qualified for the employment competition in the higher level of the labour market that they aim at. With the changing nature of work and the emerging skill demands in the market, individuals found their previous knowledge about seeking a job was inadequate or even inaccurate in the current society. To re-build their security system and to re-gain their confidence, individuals as knowledgeable agents strive to search for information and deploy different coping strategies. This process involves gaining an understanding of and construing the structural forces within which individuals were living and working and gaining an

understanding of the extent of the agency they could exercise under these structural forces. It is also informed by individuals' experiences in their social and personal lives.

The research shows that there is a perceived 'frame of reference' (Brown, 1987) of employability composition and self-identity formation, not only influenced by structural factors but also shaped by and blended with personal experience, friends' and family's advice and information from the media. Individual accounts of the factors that constituted their employability and played roles in the labour market competition were analyzed in terms of the two currencies of personal capital that Brown and Hesketh (2004) have proposed (see Table 5.6.1). While largely conforming to Brown and Hesketh's concepts, this research also finds unique factors which are directly linked to the Chinese context, such as the role of the *hukou* system and the moral sense of studying hard and working hard. In general, the interviewees agreed that these different factors had an influence on their employment and contributed to their sense of risk and uncertainty. The "hard currencies" were identified as professional skills and knowledge, educational capital (both educational degree level and educational institutional level), work experience, the *hukou* system and social networks (*guanxi*):

- Professional skills and knowledge were considered the basis for personal achievement at work or study. People were seeking to distinguish themselves from each other by deepening and reinforcing their knowledge of their subjects and fields; by so doing, they could enjoy extra advantages in the labour market. The interviewees also realized the enhanced possibilities for lifelong learning arising from technological innovations that offer opportunities for them to improve their professional skills and knowledge.

- Educational qualifications were considered as significant for people's position in the labour market competition, especially for new entrants, as a brick to knock down the barrier or gate to the labour market. The competition for credentials was perceived to occur at two levels, inter-qualification (different degree levels) and intra-qualification competition (non-/elite university degrees). Not surprisingly, higher-degree holders and elite-university-degree holders were perceived to have more advantages in employment.

Qualifications were considered subject to devaluation in the context of higher education expansion, making their 'real' value difficult to predict. The student interviewees emphasized more than their working counterparts the role of qualifications in gaining employment. While the students emphasized all sorts of qualifications they had obtained, the older interviewees took their longer work experience as offering an advantage over their younger counterparts. Those from elite universities revealed a confidence in their degrees, as did those with foreign degrees; the non-elite universities students tended to show less confidence in terms of competing in the labour market with their educational credentials. However, it was reiterated by all the interviewees that qualifications only got one into the competition, and real success depended on demonstrating one's skills and knowledge.

-- Working experience was considered to be essential for personal success in the labour market competition. It was commonly perceived that academic credentials and work experience were complementary and some respondents had developed a 'calculus of equivalence' between length of work experience and different levels of qualifications. While one could master relevant theories through academic degree study, the respondents perceived work experience as enabling people to 'grow up' in terms of professional skill and knowledge, as indicating their interpersonal skills and as denoting their level of social experience and social contacts, thereby contributing to their stock of social capital.

-- Using *guanxi* capital as social advantage was regarded differently by different groups of people. While younger respondents thought *guanxi* in a negative way, those older interviewees could not deny its structural role of distributing people's life chances in the society according to their experience in the labour market. This research suggests that *guanxi* capital entailed elements of both cultural capital and social capital in the eastern society, which is different from its understanding in the western contexts. First, *guanxi* capital was referred to family's socio-economic status, that is, whether parents were professional, intellectuals, etc. and whether they could provide useful knowledge and information to assist the children's employment competition. Second, this notion was referred to family's social

connections, which could increase a person's life chances and opportunities of success.

-- *Hukou*, the Shanghai citizen identification, was ranked the second least important factor in competition in the Shanghai labour market. While describing *hukou* as playing a protection role in employment, the respondents (89.2%) agreed that Shanghai citizens were facing more and more challenges and competition from people from other parts of the country. In the context of higher education expansion, the *hukou* system was only perceived to screen over-supply of undergraduate degree holders.

The 'soft currencies' included soft skills, ethics and '*xin tai*':

-- Soft skills were considered as essential for personal success, especially due to the changing nature of work. Particular emphasis was placed on teamwork, communication skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, logical thinking, and self-judgement skills. Three routes to improving one's soft skills were recognized: doing social work during formal studies, training on the job and promoting skills through participating in lifelong learning. However, the interviewees stated formal education itself as contributing to the development of soft skills.

-- The ethical issues referred to were hard work, modesty, responsibility, reliability and being active at work. They were seen as aspects of Chinese culture and were considered to be critical elements to personal success in the labour market. These qualities were considered as a form of ethics and morality and can be related to the interviewees' basic ontological security system. No matter what changes were taking place in society, people had confidence and trust in certain traditions, cultures and ideologies.

-- '*Xin tai*', as a form of Emotional Quotient (EQ) was rated as highly important. Only two of the interviewees directly identified EQ as a 'professional' term, but others referred to relevant elements, such as self-adjustment and psychological qualities. People needed to be emotionally well-prepared for the competition, frustration, uncertainty and risk that characterize the current labour market.

Individual agents, particularly those already working, have extensive information and knowledge of the new socio-economic condition. They are aware that there is a range of structural factors influencing how the labour market competition is conducted. Meanwhile, individuals apply this 'frame of reference' as a way to measure their own employability and to evaluate their standing in the employment competition; and in turn, it can be considered as a way of constructing self-identity.

The research findings show that different people, with different personal histories and social experiences, may possess different social positions and resources. They have the ability to identify what their advantages and disadvantages are over others in line with their perceived 'frame of reference'. Accordingly, they design their strategies for standing out in the labour market competition. Despite different people adopting different strategies in line with their different social positions, three general strategies are identified, both explicitly and implicitly by the interviewees, to cope with the fierce labour market competition, to develop their employability and to rebuild their basic security system.

The first coping strategy is to be self-responsible and self-reliant. While individuals enjoy more freedom and space to exercise their agency in the new social sphere, they also have more responsibility for themselves imposed by the government and the community. Rather than being protected by a job-for-life system, individuals realize that their lives become a continuous process of decision making, that they need to be the centre of this process and needed to be responsible for all sorts of consequences of their decisions and actions. The second coping strategy is to seek for various positional advantages while improving substantial personal skills and knowledge in their employability construction. This strategy reflects Brown and Hesketh's (2004) notion of 'a duality of employability'. To win a position in the labour market competition, individuals not only need to obtain innate capabilities and make greater efforts in terms of their professional achievement, but also need to possess the right skills and knowledge so as to meet the employers' specific demands and to demonstrate their individuality. The third coping strategy identified is to study hard, work hard and be modest. If the first two coping strategies are thought of as discursive consciousness and individuals' reflexive action in the new socio-economic condition, this third coping

strategy can be understood as practical consciousness and drawing on a deeply-ingrained cultural knowledge. To study hard and work hard provide a sense of ontological security for individuals to deal with changes and uncertainties and improve their confidence.

Theoretically, individuals' engagement with the world of work in the rapidly changing era can be explained by Giddens' structuration theory and the notions of 'reflexivity' and 'self-identity' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Billett, 2006). Giddens argues that individuals are able to increasingly exercise their agency to dealing with the anxiety and uncertainties engendered in the late modern society, while being socially subjugated at the same time. But Fenwick (1998) and Billett (2006) both counter this theoretical position. They suggest that individuals are not anxiety ridden; instead, they are able to exercise their preference and freedom in order to pursue their intentionality and goals with much less structural constraint than Giddens recognizes. However, this research shows that the interviewees had and were aware of the anxieties and uncertainties in the contemporary Chinese context which influenced and constrained their agentic action. Hence, Giddens' theory holds more explanatory power in this context. The findings show that individuals enjoy the increasing agency to plan and manage their employability according to their interests and goals. However, they are still constrained by certain structural factors, such as the changing social, economic and educational policies, deeply rooted cultural influences and the tensions created by these two. To sum up, individuals are seeking to balance what they have confronted in the external world with their own intentionality (Giddens, 1991). This contributes to rebuilding their ontological security system and in turn developing a sense of self. This point will be raised again in relation to the analysis of individuals' learning participation and decision-making, later on in this section.

7.2.2 Individuals' participation in the STTP programme

This research also explores individuals' participation in the localized education and training programme, STTP, and their perception of lifelong learning in general. Both sets of data, quantitative and qualitative, reveal that the learning motivations are multi-factorial. They not only arise from economic reasons, but also are contingent on other life episodes in a wider context of individual values, interests, intentions and social relationships. In other words, the individualized or agentic learning is structuring and

structured by a range of values and socio-economic factors. Echoing the findings on individuals' employability construction, their learning participation can also be viewed as a reflexive project of making sense of the self. In general, this research finds three special meanings for individuals of lifelong learning and learning in STTP in particular.

First, bearing in mind what is happening in the world of work, the individuals present their understanding of what work-related skills and knowledge are needed in their own specific vocational field and what new skill requirements are emerging in the Shanghai labour market in general. In light of this understanding, the individuals identify what skills and knowledge they lack, what skills and knowledge they themselves might need to deal with their work or future work, and what skills and knowledge have not yet been delivered or developed in their full-time education experiences. With their information about the increasing learning opportunities in the educational market, they tend to pick the 'right' programme for themselves in order to meet their skills and knowledge needs. For some at least, the STTP programme at this stage turn out to be the 'right' opportunity, as its courses deliver updated knowledge and skills. Through their STTP learning, the interviewees found that some of their skills and knowledge needs were met. However, there were voices expressing that the traditional teaching methods did not help to develop the participants' desired skills and knowledge. In these cases, the STTP learning experience can be considered to be only partially successful as a functional model of learning.

Second, integrating their understanding of employability and the labour market competition, individuals realize that only by possessing extra qualifications could they be protected in the context of higher education expansion and credential inflation. This credentialist mentality is also reinforced by the deeply-rooted Chinese culture of credentials as a way of measuring an individual's capability. The value and quality of STTP qualifications and their consequent social reputation are taken to be symbolized by the governmental brand, which to some extent attract the individuals' participation. In contrast, most of the individuals have experienced the poor quality of teaching, assessment and organization in STTP, which undermine their beliefs and trust in the value of the qualifications. However, the individual can not avoid the STTP qualifications' objective role in the labour market of sifting applicants. Their experience in employment seeking also reinforces their idea that employers value the STTP

qualification in choosing applicants. In addition, the relatively new ‘flexible’ learning organization in STTP assists individuals’ autonomous learning planning. People arrange their learning tactically according to their own situations, in terms of when they need the qualifications. In this sense, participation in the STTP learning can be interpreted in terms of a strong sense of credentialism; and the qualifications can be considered as positional goods.

Third, a strong sense of learning as moral duty emerges from the findings, rooted in the idea of self-development and ‘being a good person’ which is deeply ingrained in Confucian culture. The individuals showed their self-satisfaction of joining in learning, no matter what they would learn and no matter what the learning result would be. The respondents were conscious of the instrumental sense of learning; however, it is important to note that they also valued the moral implications in their learning participation in STTP as well as in other education more generally. For example, the two employers particularly pointed out that (active) engagement in various learning could show this candidate’s ‘*xin tai*’.

In addition, people’s perception and understanding of lifelong learning is also mediated by the above three rationales, but with different emphases. The learners find it unavoidable in the current socio-economic situation that their participation in lifelong learning is driven by the demand for new skills and the fierce competition in the labour market. However, the respondents continuously reiterate and define that ‘real’ lifelong learning should be interest-driven and should be learning for its own sake, so as to make one a better person. This personal development view of education, as a cultural resource, is dominant, trusted and taken for granted among learners. This might provide the government with a considerable advantage in encouraging citizens to participate in learning and in creating a learning society, even though the government’s initial goal is to build up a skill-growth model learning society. This point will be raised again later, in relation to and in comparison with the potential threat from credentialism.

The above findings fit well into the notion of individualization of learning (Edward, 1997; Su, 2007). Throughout the research data, there is a strong sense of self-responsibility emerging in relation to individuals’ management of their own learning. This echoes the findings that individuals felt they were left on their own and responsible

for their survival in the competitive labour market competition. Not only do individuals need to be responsible for their employment survival, but also for managing their learning to develop their employability. Making decisions about participation in learning becomes an interplay between the self, one's social experience and the socio-economic structure. First, the individual decision to engage in learning, in particular the STTP learning interacts with the socio-economic factors and context. Individual's learning is motivated by the changing nature of work, i.e. the new skill demands and the governmental policy on credentializing certain work positions. To survive in the employment competition, individuals are constrained to take on further learning to update their skills and obtain specific certificates, despite these two goals not necessarily being related, as the research data shows (this point will be elaborated on in the next section). Also, the interview data suggest that learning costs such as time and tuition fee are not necessarily a constraint for learning participation. On the other hand, however, the questionnaire data suggests that a relatively affordable tuition fee and intensive learning duration were among the STTP attractions to individual learners. Thus, learning costs are to some extent a consideration, but not the only motivation, for individuals' learning participation.

Second, individual goals and interests are formed with awareness in mind of the social positions and the resources available; and this influences the decision to participate and invest in lifelong learning. These goals are not necessarily in accordance with the social concerns expressed by the government. Different people possess different social positions in the labour market. Individuals are able to identify their social position according to a 'frame of reference', such as being an elite university graduate, a postgraduate student or an experienced worker with profound knowledge and skills. Related to their understanding of their position in the labour market competition, those who have relatively well established careers or have found decent jobs adopt or can afford to adopt a more relaxed view of their learning, with a reduced concern over gaining the qualifications. As they have overcome their anxiety in the labour market, then the STTP learning appear to provide an opportunity from which they can develop and improve their skills and knowledge. In contrast, for those who are about to enter the fierce labour market competition and feel stressed about their weak position, obtaining the STTP qualifications seem to be an essential component of their employability construction.

Third, it can also be argued from the findings that individuals' learning can be motivated by different reasons as their social experience develops over time. During their learning, the individual learners continuously evaluate and reflect on their actual learning experience and their expectations. They may also compare their experience in STTP with other learning and social experiences, such as full-time education, on-the-job training, informal learning and their employment experience. Through both their positive and negative reflections on the STTP programme, the individual learners develop their knowledge of learning and learning opportunities, re-identify their learning motives, and adjust their course of action. Moreover, these changes take place in different life stages or along with their changing social positions. For example, a non-elite university student might take part in the STTP learning to improve his or her professional English translation and interpretation skills and obtain a certificate, so as to be qualified to join in the employment race against his peers as well as competitors from elite universities. Having started working, his work experience promotes his employability, which facilitates his standing in the labour market. As his standing in the labour market competition became assured, he would be able to afford to manage his learning with a reduced concern over obtaining extra certificates.

To sum up, the STTP learning becomes an individualized product of the reflexive negotiation between individuals, their social experience and the socio-economic structure. We can argue that individuals' learning experience in STTP is embedded in various social relations and can be seen as part of a complex process of building learner identity and making sense of the self.

Theoretically, the analysis of the learning participation in this research is based on rational choice theory and the notion of learner identity. Both frameworks enable us to understand and analyze the interaction among the individual self, their actions and the socio-economic structure. While rational choice theory, in particular the weak version, helps us to understand one particular episode of individuals' action, i.e. making the decision to take on the STTP learning in this research; a learner identity framework facilitates our understanding of the changes and transformations in individuals' motivations and perceptions of learning, by relating their management of learning to

other factors and aspects of their life, their values and beliefs and the social settings in which they are located.

The research findings show that a strong version of rational choice theory can not adequately explain and help us to understand individuals' decision-making in STTP; rather a weaker version and the notion of 'expressive rationality' can assist our understanding more comprehensively. The research data suggest that the individuals' decision making in participating in STTP is not purely based on the economic model of maximizing utility. In this late modern society, filled with risks and uncertainties, individuals are increasingly exerting their agency and have knowledge to deal with social, economic and cultural changes. However, individuals' action is not totally free or autonomous. Their goals and interests are still partly influenced and constrained by social forces, and their actions in turn are constrained. The individual learners in this research showed their knowledge and information about alternative means of pursuing these goals. To choose their courses of action, they assessed probable cost and benefits to some extent. However, we need to bear in mind that the information on which decision-making is based becomes inadequate and unpredictable in this 'risk society'; therefore, rather than being purely instrumentally rational actors, individuals are able to explore and identify their social position, to deploy appropriate strategies to adapt into the new social conditions, and to construct the self. Believing in the moral imperative of education, individuals espouse and act on cultural values, but not unthinkingly or without reflection. It can be seen as a reflexive process, connecting personal and social changes (Harrison, 2000). Related to this point, contextual knowledge and information are found useful and valuable in understanding and analysing people's actions. However, this research shows that in this changing society, individuals, instead of being 'culture dopes', tend to balance tradition and change. While individual learners consider their participation in learning as part of rebuilding their ontological security system, they also consider self-responsibility as an important strategy for them to survive in the fierce competition. Overall then, and in brief, a weak form of rational choice theory is useful for understanding the individual learners' decision making in participating in the STTP courses and lifelong learning in a more general sense, showing the complex interplay between the personal choice and social relations.

However, the theoretical framework of rational choice only provides an explanation and understanding of different episodes in life courses. It may not be able to form a coherent picture of more complex continuity, changes and transitions in people's lives. As Hatcher (1998, p.16) suggests, rational choice theory has '*no conception of a multiplicity of historically-constructed social identities ... which defines their [students'] attitude to the range of opportunities that they see before them*'. In this sense, the notion of 'learner identity' helps us to understand personal development, both continuity and changes, within a wider social, economic and cultural context. This notion offers a more coherent and comprehensive view than rational choice theory in terms of analysing and understanding the negotiation between individuals and institutional factors and the consequences this creates. Sharing with rational choice theory, the view that individuals, due to their different social positions and the resources and opportunities available to them, might be motivated by different intentions and make different decisions, the notion of 'learner identity' also enables us to analyze and discuss the subjectivity and the course of action within the same person over different times, such as before and after studying in STTP, and before and after the transition from school to workplace. An individual may have different social positions at different life stages, and in turn may enjoy different personal goals, interests and intentions. Also, his personal goals, interests and intentions can be influenced and constrained by different structural forces at different periods of time. For example, a non-elite university student (such as Hanfei) might find it significant and rational to gain the STTP qualification to add extra value to her employability, so as to increase her life chances to compete against those elite university graduates in the labour market at her graduation. After working for a few years, she had gained a certain amount of work experience and shown her ability at work. She did not need extra qualifications to reinforce her employability, and to participate in STTP might not be a rational choice in its purely instrumental sense to her. Therefore, we can argue that, while a weak version of rational choice theory explains one snap-shot episode of an individual's life course, 'learner identity' can enable us to understand the changes and transformations in an individual's learning trajectory. In other words, the multi-dimensional notion of learner identity enables us to connect different acts of decision making in one's life and form an understanding of the reflexive project of 'making the self'.

7.2.3 Education, training and qualification

The final strand of this research answers the questions about the perceived relationships between education and training and qualification and individuals' perceptions about the nature and role of human capital in relation to the labour market and with respect to education, training and qualification. The research findings reflect a strong sense of credentialism along with a weak technocratic view among the individual respondents. Not only the individual learners and non-learners in STTP but also the policy makers strongly believed that education, training and qualification have a role of signalling and screening, which in turn decides individuals' life chances in the labour market. In other words, education and training are considered as a ritualistic process of gathering qualifications in the Chinese education system; and qualifications are considered as limited paper currency to be exchanged for work opportunities.

First, qualification has become a pre-requisite for employment competition, particularly in the context of higher education expansion. Credentials are considered as a 'promissory note' for those in the lower echelons of society to have the opportunity for upward mobility in Chinese society (Bian, 2002). However, in the context of higher education expansion and despite economic development, the increasing number of university degree holders and jobs in relatively short supply makes the qualifications no longer a life assurance of individuals' places in employment as they were before the socio-economic reform in China; rather they are entrance tickets or 'cultural-capital passports' (Warmington, 2003) into the competition. Hence, the requirement of bachelor degree does not necessarily indicate the skill and knowledge level demanded for a job. The respondents gave only limited recognition to the qualification's meaning in terms of promising increased productivity, or rather the intrinsic value of the educational experiences.

Second, individuals hold a view that educational qualifications are just pieces of paper, rather than representations of skills. The research suggests the crucial origin of these viewpoints lay in the individuals' lack of trust and confidence in Chinese education and training. To the interviewees, Chinese education and training, especially in the tertiary education sector, was characterized theory-laden, rote learning and out-of-date course content. In the global knowledge economy, the teaching and learning in Chinese universities widened the gap between the skills and knowledge required in the real

world of work and those students learned at university. This view further reinforced their perceptions of the ritualistic role of education and training in China and their doubt over the validity of credentials in terms of measuring people's employability. To them, work experience which was accumulated at a 'real' workplace provided them with 'real' skills and knowledge.

As qualifications are considered as not equally indicating the holders' possession of skills and knowledge, it is difficult to tell who has the skills and knowledge appropriate to a particular job and who will do a better job. In the context of higher education expansion and credential inflation, it is difficult to stand out from the crowd by possessing only a university degree. It is believed to be important that there are 'markers' of the differential value ascribed to particular credentials. Therefore, the different education and training experiences behind each qualification, as certified by the ranking of the institution in a worldly recognized hierarchical system, are considered as a form of obtaining positional advantage to open up one's life chances. These positional advantage elements of educational qualifications are signalled by educational institutional reputation and institution locality.

Third, related to the above point, individuals also believe that the role of educational qualifications in helping them to enter the labour market competition is limited. Echoing the finding that employability is a multi-factorial notion, there is a common belief among the interviewees that once individuals' other personal qualities, particularly their professional knowledge and skills, had been proved through their work experience, they would not necessarily need the credential protection. Hence, the value of a qualification gradually became zero as work experience increased. Here, again, the importance of work experience is emphasized. Being confronting with real situations, problems and questions is more useful and more significant to the development of knowledge and skills.

To sum up, the research respondents did not deny the significance of obtaining various qualifications as positional goods in the labour market competition. In the response to the previous research questions, we have shown that individuals are increasingly exerting their agency and engaging in negotiation between personal and social experience in this late modern society, by means such as planning their employability

construction and making choices about their learning. Nevertheless, individuals' actions are still to some extent influenced and constrained by socio-economic structures. The individuals realize that before they can exert their agency and make decisions on what, how, when and where to learn so as to develop their employability, their life chances have been partially structured to some extent, by factors such as the level and reputation of the educational degrees held, the length of work experience, and their geographical origins (*hukou*). Therefore, structural forces play a role in their learning experience. Different people in different social positions may have different learning stories to tell; and education, training and qualification can indicate different meanings to them. For example, while the working individuals found themselves enjoying most of the qualities required at work and could afford to take on a 'relaxed' learning attitude – focusing on skills and knowledge rather than qualifications in their learning – the students with limited personal capital were constrained in a fierce positional competition for different sorts of educational qualifications. In this sense, the STTP programme as a whole is perceived to serve a dual purpose: the STTP certificates are more utilized as a positional good to add extra value to other forms of qualifications, such as university degrees and to reinforce their holders' competitiveness in the intensive inter-graduate competition for employment; and once the individuals possess a relatively comfortable position in the labour market the STTP courses are employed as a way to develop their substantial skills and knowledge.

Therefore, looking through all the data, this research shows that a coherent theoretical framework of integrating both human capital theory and positional conflict theory is needed to fully understand the individuals' learning management and their experience in the labour market. In relation to education and training, human capital theory assumes that rational actors invest in their learning according to their best self-interests, based on maximizing utility under economic constraints, such as learning costs (Mgobozi, 2004). In this research, the individuals' accounts of investing in their learning in STTP and in lifelong learning in a more general sense is partially explained by their perceived need to learn new and updated skills and knowledge for the changing nature of work. However, the research findings also reveal the socially constructed nature of lifelong learning with non-economic determinants of the differential experiences of people at different social positions in the labour market, as Mgobozi (*ibid*) suggests. The research shows that individual actors are motivated by multiple reasons across individuals and

over time to utilize education and training and the qualifications provided as positional goods to develop their personal capital and employability in the labour market competition. Here, an individualized form of positional conflict theory seems to provide a more adequate account and understanding for this ‘qualification-chasing’ phenomenon in Shanghai. Hence, rather than separating the two contesting theorization of education, training and work, this research suggests the need to integrate human capital theory and positional competition theory in explaining and understanding individual learning participation in the STTP programme, which also provides wider theoretical understanding for people’s involvement in lifelong learning in a more general sense.

From a sociological perspective, the research evidence shows that neither of the two social theories, – human capital theory and positional conflict theory -- is totally adequate or perfectly useful in understand and explaining the interaction between individual action and the social structure. Human capital theory provides an explanation of individuals’ rational choice on the education and training, but ignores the role of structural constraints in individuals’ actions. Positional conflict theory as it is currently construed in Western sociological western sociological literature, as a macro-structural theory, partially elicits individuals’ struggle in education and work, but seems to lack the power to explain what is happening at the individual level. This research data demonstrates the dynamic relationship between personal perceptions and experiences in education, training and the labour market competition and structural forces created by both cultural ideologies and the contemporary social changes in the Chinese context. They can not be analyzed or conceptualized as dichotomies but rather as a continuum, as Ritzer and Goodman (2003) argue. In other words, this research contributes to the debate on integrating agency and structure to connect these two different level social theories, depicting and explaining the interactions and constructing the reality of the labour market and lifelong learning in Shanghai.

7.2.4 Integrating the three strands of the research questions

Here, to integrate all the three strands of the research questions and think about the notions of lifelong learning and a learning society, we find both potential advantages and threats in developing lifelong learning and widening learning participation in the Chinese context. First, as argued in section 7.2.2, a Confucian ideology of learning is still deeply rooted in people’s minds. People respect learning for its own sake and

believe learning makes one a better person and enhances social mobility. These beliefs also influence people's learning decisions. In turn, this Chinese cultural resource could potentially be conducive to building and promoting a learning society in China, where everyone takes an active part in learning, regardless of age, gender, or socio-economic background. This situation in China may contrast with that of the UK and some other western industrial societies where the influence of social class on a wide range of social phenomena is deeply ingrained. Research in the UK reveals strong class-based patterns of access to and participation in learning across the population, which can create barriers to promote lifelong learning (Gorard and Rees, 2002; Fuller, 2007). If a new system of social stratification is emerging in China, as we point out in Chapter 1, social mobility may possibly decrease and people's attitude towards learning may change. That is an area for future research, but my findings reported here clearly suggest that the belief in the intrinsic value of learning can be a positive driving force to widen lifelong learning participation in the current Chinese society.

Second, however, the research findings illustrate that both instrumental views and credentialist views of education, training and qualification can be potential threats to developing lifelong learning in China. In spite of their strong commitment to learn as part of their cultural identity, the learners have doubts about the quality of the education system, in particular the formal education sector, and the role of education and qualifications. The learners find themselves both responsible and compelled to be engaged in learning to develop and improve their skills and knowledge to meet the present labour market demand and to be engaged in a qualification battle to improve their position in the labour market competition. These understandings have influence on individual agentic action, as discussed above. These perceptions do not sit well with culturally influenced beliefs about the role of education, but rather conflict with and challenge them. Currently, the Shanghai Municipal Government is in the process of collecting views to inform the development and regulation of its 'international human resource platform' (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2008). This may present an opportunity for the authorities to attempt to inhibit the growth of credentialism that could undermine the potential offered by this culturally ingrained view of learning to build a lifelong learning society. If we identify credentialism as a key mechanism of positional competition, rather than contributing to the engagement with education for genuine self-improvement that underpins human capital approaches, then we might

argue that, despite its embracing of human capital theory as a policy foundation, the Shanghai Government, through STTP at least, may be doing more to promote a positional competition approach to education. The irony of this is that there does in fact appear to be a firm basis in the people's perceptions of 'real' education for the promotion of engagement in lifelong learning for individual betterment and genuine skills development.

This research also demonstrates and addresses the important point that context makes a difference. The notions of lifelong learning and a learning society have been criticized for their notoriously loose definitions (Evans, 2006), but this research does not aim to provide a more lucid or specific definition of either. Rather, it explores and understands the meaning of lifelong learning to learners in contemporary China - Shanghai in particular. In this respect, it illustrates that such meanings cannot be understood without relevant socio-economic contextual analysis. The multi-faceted and multi-layered meanings of lifelong learning to individuals and their experience in the labour market found in this research demonstrate not only similarities between China and other parts of the world under the forces of globalization, but also the uniqueness of the Chinese context in terms of its socio-economic history and culture.

7.3 Emergent issues and policy implications

On answering the three strands of the research questions, two emergent issues are identified in relation to the policy implications for education and training development in Shanghai. First, a mismatch between the government policy orientation and the individual learning needs indicates the importance of rethinking the nature of the course delivery in STTP. Second, the quality of the STTP courses is questioned by the individual learners in respect of their out-of-date teaching, learning and assessment. These emergent issues in turn show the importance of developing work-based learning in the skill formation strategy and the need to develop a quality assurance system in STTP. These issues also propose possible ways to improve the STTP programme by further strengthening the coordination between different stakeholders and clarifying their responsibilities. These points will now be explored in more detail.

By looking through the whole research findings and comparing the individuals' views, the policy-makers' views and the policy discourse on STTP, a mismatch between the Shanghai government policy focus on lifelong learning and the STTP programme and the individual learning needs is found. STTP is introduced by the Shanghai municipal authorities in an attempt to maintain the momentum of the city's development by targeting skills shortages and skill formation. It is inspired by straightforward human capital development concerns from the government perspective. However, the individuals' learning and non-learning stories suggest that a strong cultural force of credentialism influences people's learning management; and this cultural value is reinforced in the practice of STTP. Although other research shows that there is growing class stratification in China and in Shanghai (see Chapter 1), the ideology of a meritocratic competition for individual social improvement is deeply ingrained in people's mind. People believe strongly that gaining educational qualifications might expand their opportunities in the labour market. Meritocracy is able to operate in a neutral way of judging contestants and to lead to greater equality of outcomes in a context of economic growth and full employment (Brown, 2001). It is true that economic growth has soared in China, especially in Shanghai; however, the respondents understood that the available opportunities in the labour market were limited. Moreover, the respondents understood the existing hierarchy or inequality between different educational capitals and occupational positions. In other words, the existing perceptions of education and training in Shanghai and various interpretations of the needs of the labour market strengthen, or rather exaggerate, the consequences of success or failure in the competition for all sorts of credentials in the current Shanghai labour market. It can be argued in this research that the more the stakes of gaining credentials and other forms of comparative advantages to compete and survive in the labour market are seen to increase, the more intensive positional competition between individuals will become. Therefore, credentialism presents a major challenge to developing STTP into a genuine skill formation programme. In this sense, the Shanghai municipal government might need to rethink their strategies to ensure the success of this human resource development programme, fighting against the historical cultural force of credentialism.

Second, the quality of the STTP courses is questioned. Through the individual stories, it was not difficult to see a passion for taking part in learning in STTP at the very beginning, either motivated by the new skills and knowledge demanded in the work

place or by the fierce competition for qualifications. However, the participants' views on STTP were largely changed after their participation in this programme. Two concerns are identified. First, the individual learners found a gap between the actual teaching, learning and assessment in this programme and their expectations. From the participants' perspectives, the 'old-style' of rote teaching, learning and the theory-laden assessment diverged from the programme's original aims, as set up by the government. The individual learners expected the STTP courses to be a practical skills and knowledge training programme, which should provide updated information and 'hands-on' experience. In practice, however, they still found the courses retained dull and inflexible teaching, learning and assessment, focusing too much on passing theoretical exams. In this sense, the skills and knowledge they learned in STTP can not be considered utilizable in the real world of work. These experiences and opinions discourage the learners' further participation in such courses.

In a society as dynamic as that of Shanghai, it is not surprising to note that STTP is undergoing some interesting changes. Of particular note, in view of the criticisms of quality issues is that the authorities have recently introduced internationally recognised courses and their associated qualifications into some of their programmes, such as ACCA into the accounting course. Interpretations of this decision, and its implications for the future of STTP and its use, are beyond the scope of this research, but it does suggest that the programme may continue to be of interest to researchers in this field.

In response to the above two issues or challenges to develop the STTP programme into a genuine skill upgrading strategy, this research generates evidence of the need to recognize the importance of other forms of learning, particularly work-based learning. Work-based learning is premised on an appreciation that work is imbued with learning opportunities on a day-to-day basis, recognising the flexibility and accessibility for learning (Boud and Symes, 2000). Also, students acquire various practical skills and knowledge and learn about industries so as to plan for their career development through such straightforward experience (Bailey, *et al*, 2004). These advantages of work-based learning seem to be alternatives to the challenges to the current STTP programme identified in this research. It would be worthwhile for the government to explore new ways to integrate work-based learning into this skill formation strategy, as well as traditional teaching and learning.

Related to the concern over poor quality, the individual learners showed their worries about the over-marketized delivery mechanism but without a quality assurance system in the STTP management. Asked whether there was a quality assurance system in STTP, the policy maker interviewees answered indirectly and thought the unified assessment was a way to evaluate the quality and, in turn, the market would control the quality. On the other hand, from the learners' perspective, running the STTP courses might be no more than another way of gaining financial profit for those institutions and gaining extra money for those teachers who have already have a full-time teaching post in higher education institutions. The individual learners were not totally convinced by the marketized mechanism for managing education and training. One way to deal with these concerns would be to further strengthen the coordination between the municipal government, relevant industries and education and training sectors in Shanghai to build up a quality assurance system to improve, inspect and evaluate the course delivery in STTP. To individual learners, such a quality assurance system could reassure them about the benefits of learning in STTP.

Brown *et al* (2001) suggest that such coordination between different stakeholders lies at the heart of a skill formation strategy to meet both supply and demand in the labour market. What roles the government, the relevant industries and education and training sector should play are beyond the scope of this study. Future research is needed to explore the coordination between different stakeholders, how to improve the relevant policy of lifelong learning and the STTP programme in Shanghai, and how to build up a quality assurance system for teaching, learning and assessment in STTP.

Appendix 1: STTP course list (by Sep 2004, from STTP head office, 2004)

Category	Courses	Tuition	Training duration
Finance	Finance management	14000	6 months
	Investment consultancy	4000	2 months
Advanced accounting	International accounting	10000	2 years
	Company accounting management	3000	2 months
	Auditing	15000	6 months
International business management	Intermediate/advanced logistics	7000	4 months
	E-business	1000	6 months
	Chain management	3000	6 months
	Advanced training management	10000	6 months
	Employee trainee	4000	3 months
	Intermediate/advanced management consultancy	4000	2 months
	Human resource management	1600	6 months
	Advanced secretary training	1000	6 months
	Public relations	3000	6 months
	International business	800	6 months
	Automobile industry management	3000	6 months
	Customer service		6 months
	Service evaluation	4000	
	Quality assurance in industries		
	Supply chain management	4000	6 months
Entrepreneurship	Administration management	1000	6 months
	CEO training	4000	1 year
	Sales director training	4000	1 year
	Finance director training	4000	1 year
	HR director training	4000	1 year
	Information director training	4000	1 year
	Quality and environment management	4000	1 year
	Technique management	4000	1 year
	Project manager training	4000	1 year
WTO training	WTO business and trading	3000	6 months
	Professional management for WTO issues	3000	6 months
Foreign language	Korean language training	1600	1 year
	Intermediate/advanced Japanese-Chinese interpretation	3000	6 months
	Intermediate/advanced English-Chinese interpretation	3000	6 months
	General English (level 1-4)	800	6 months
International law	International law		
Exposition	Exposition management	1600	6 months

management			
	International exposition	20000	6 months
Information technology	ERP training course	3000	6 months
	Multi-media design and application	3000	6 months
	Information technology management	1000	6 months
	Computing skills and application	3000	6 months
	Linux training	6000	6 months
Modern science	CMOS training	4000	6 months
	Nanometer technology	4000	6 months
Modern techniques	Modern farming		
Architecture industry	Residence architecture design	900	2 months
	City architecture design	900	2 months

Appendix 2: Questionnaire fieldwork

Questionnaire

Dear Friends,

The Training Programme for Cultivation of Talent Shortage (STTP) was developed in Shanghai more than 10 years ago. Now in its 11th year, STTP has been enlarging its training scale and enriching its content. At the same time, more and more participants, from different age groups and different educational backgrounds, have been taking part in it. Up to now, STTP has successfully become one of the most popular training programmes among Shanghai citizens and relevant working staff.

Of course, different people will have different aims and expectations to participate in STTP. This questionnaire is aimed at obtaining a deeper understanding of people's motivations for taking part in STTP. It is part of the research programme looking at the nature of positional competition in the Shanghai labour market and people's motivations for lifelong learning. As a participant, you are invited to complete this questionnaire. All of your help and opinions will be welcome. I will be so appreciative for your cooperation.

The information that you give us will be treated in the strictest confidence by me and it will not be possible to identify you individually in any reports published that arise from this research. Thank you so much for your time and help!

*Wang Qi
(Department of Education, University of Bath, England)*

I. Your Current Participation in STTP:

1. Which of the following statements most applies to you? ____ (Choose ONE answer only, and please complete the question fully)

- A. You have been only taking part in one course in the programme STTP;
- B. You have been taking part in two or more than two courses in the programme STTP. If so, how many courses have you taken in total? And what are they?
_____;

2. Have you been taking other training programmes in lifelong learning sector?

- A. Yes. _____ (Please name the courses); B. No.

3. What subject are you learning about? ____

- A. Accountancy/Finance;
- B. Business/Administration/Management;
- C. Building construction and trades;
- D. Computer studies;
- E. Foreign language;
- F. Law;
- G. Exposition organization;
- H. WTO issues and relevant knowledge;
- I. Others _____ (Please note it in detail).

4. Have you sat any examinations in STTP? _____ (Yes/No)
If not, will you take one when you finish the training? _____ (Yes/No)
5. After this training course, how likely will you take up another course in STTP? _____
(Choose ONE answer only)
- A. Very likely;
 - B. Fairly likely;
 - C. Fairly unlikely;
 - D. Very unlikely;
 - E. Don't know.
- If you are intended to continue your study in STTP, which subject(s) will you be interested in? _____

II. Your Motivation of Participating in STTP:

6. How did you find out about STTP? _____
- A. From friends/family/workmates;
 - B. From media, i.e. TV/radio/newspaper/magazines;
 - C. From university or college of higher education;
 - D. From community centre;
 - E. Others _____ (Please state).
7. Why did you choose to study in the programme of STTP? _____ (Choose all that apply to you)
- A. To get a job anywhere;
 - B. To get a job in Shanghai;
 - C. To change the type of work I am doing;
 - D. To gain promotion;
 - E. To gain a rise in earnings;
 - F. To gain job satisfaction;
 - G. To help me towards a future course of learning;
 - H. To get a recognized qualification;
 - I. More and more people having taken part in it;
 - J. To get an increasingly important qualification or certificate;
 - K. To obtain learning experience;
 - L. To enrich my leisure activities;
 - M. Others _____ (Please state).
8. Who pays the fees for this learning? _____
- A. Self;
 - B. Family;
 - C. The current employer;
 - D. Others _____ (Please state).
9. Sometimes learning can have other costs apart from tuition fees. Think about your own situation, does your study and learning in STTP lead to any costs like these? _____ (Choose all that apply)

- A. Loss of wage;
- B. Loss of benefits, such as your leisure time, the time you spend with your family, and so on;
- C. Material and equipment cost, i.e. books, tapes and so on;
- D. Travel cost, i.e. bus ticket;
- E. Waste of time and money if you cannot obtain a certificate at the end of the training;
- F. Others _____ (Please state).

III. Your Perception of the Value of STTP:

10. What do you think about the value or advantages of the programme STTP?
_____ (Choose all that apply)

- A. STTP provides qualifications which are highly recognized in the Shanghai labour market;
- B. The course content of STTP is more work-related;
- C. The course content is renewed over time;
- D. The teaching resources in STTP are based in higher education;
- E. The learning in STTP is flexible;
- F. The training duration is appropriate;
- G. The training cost is affordable;
- H. Others _____ (Please state).

11. As far as you know, what factors might make other people not participate in STTP?
_____ (Choose all that apply)

- A. The course tuition fee is too expensive;
- B. The course duration is too short;
- C. The qualifications provided in STTP will not be recognized in other cities or areas;
- D. Others _____ (Please state).

12. What relevant value do you think is equal to or can be compared to the qualification generated in STTP? _____

- A. A post higher degree or diploma, i.e. Master, PhD;
- B. A bachelor degree;
- C. A vocational or professional degree for certain job/industry;
- D. It is less valuable than all those qualifications mentioned above;
- E. Not sure.

IV. Your Perception of Positional Competition in the Shanghai Labour Market:

13. What factors lead training programmes in the lifelong learning sector like STTP to great popularity? Please read the following statements, and mark how much you agree or disagree?

	<i>Agree strongly</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree strongly</i>
a) Because of the expansion of higher education, the value of the university degree is reduced.	1	2	3	4	5
b) Because so many people now have higher education credentials, people need new alternative qualifications to show their ability in the labour market.	1	2	3	4	5
c) Shanghai citizen are facing more challenges and competitions from people from other parts of the country.	1	2	3	4	5
d) Localized qualifications, such as STTP, will provide Shanghai citizens with special protection and privilege to compete in the labour market.	1	2	3	4	5
e) STTP inspires people to realize that learning is something people do and will benefit from throughout their life.	1	2	3	4	5
f) In STTP, the qualification, rather than the content, is the attraction to the participants.	1	2	3	4	5
g) The localized qualifications will become the first choice, if people hope to enter the Shanghai labour market.	1	2	3	4	5

Do you have anything else to say? _____

14. Here are some statements on the current situations on the Shanghai labour market and lifelong learning. Please read them and mark to which extent you agree or disagree.

	<i>Agree strongly</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree strongly</i>
a) Different educational credentials will provide people with different positional advantages in the labour market.	1	2	3	4	5
b) Affluent material fortune will provide people with positional advantages.	1	2	3	4	5
c) Good attitude of work and study, such as hard-working, will provide people with positional advantages in the labour market.	1	2	3	4	5
d) People need to realize the importance of lifelong learning.	1	2	3	4	5
e) Fierce competition in the labour market makes lifelong learning of great importance.	1	2	3	4	5
f) The rapid-developing knowledge and technology makes lifelong learning of great importance.	1	2	3	4	5
g) Lifelong learning is valuable for its own sake, not just about jobs.	1	2	3	4	5

Do you have anything else to say? _____

15. What elements do you think a person needs to obtain, to enable them to compete in the Shanghai labour market, especially for those high-salary and high-ranking jobs?

	<i>Very important</i>	<i>important</i>	<i>unimportant</i>	<i>Not important at all</i>
a) a higher degree, i.e. master, PhD	1	2	3	4
b) a bachelor degree	1	2	3	4
c) a higher education degree from top universities	1	2	3	4
d) other qualifications apart from those of the full-time education	1	2	3	4
e) study experience abroad	1	2	3	4
f) realization and motivation for lifelong learning	1	2	3	4
g) rich working experience				
h) hard-work	1	2	3	4
i) excellent interpersonal skills	1	2	3	4
j) political status				
k) good social network	1	2	3	4
l) a Shanghai citizen identification	1	2	3	4
m) high IQ	1	2	3	4

Is there anything else you think important? _____

16. As some writers and scholars argued, 'The white-collar workers will be the first group of middle class, if middle class or upper-middle class emerges in China.' What elements do you think a person should enjoy in order being a white-collar worker?

	<i>Very important</i>	<i>important</i>	<i>unimportant</i>	<i>Not important at all</i>
a) a higher degree, i.e. master, PhD	1	2	3	4
b) a bachelor degree	1	2	3	4
c) other qualifications apart from those of the full-time education	1	2	3	4
d) political status	1	2	3	4
e) high working positions	1	2	3	4
f) social networks or connections	1	2	3	4
g) adequate working experience	1	2	3	4
h) high salary	1	2	3	4
i) affluent material assets	1	2	3	4

Is there anything else you think important? _____

V. Personal Information:

17. Which year were you born? _____ (mm/yy).

18. You are Female__ or Male __.

19. Which city are you originally from? ____
 A. Shanghai; B. Other parts of China ____.
20. What is the highest level of qualification that you now hold? ____
 A. Senior school or vocational education qualification;
 B. College qualification, graduated from which college ____;
 C. Bachelor degree, graduated from which university ____;
 D. Poster higher degree, i.e. Mater, PhD, graduated from ____;
 E. Others ____ (Please state).
21. Among the following events listed, which ones do you think have had influence on your current study and employment? ____ (Please choose all apply)
 A. Culture Revolution;
 B. Economic Reform, i.e. Opening-up to the outside world;
 C. Economic Restructuring, i.e. marketization;
 D. Higher education expansion;
 E. Others ____ (Please state).

If you are NOT full-time students, please continue to complete the questions.

22. Your employment status ____
 A. Currently employed;
 B. Currently employed, but also looking for better jobs;
 C. Currently unemployed.

(If your answer is A or B, please complete the question 22-26; if your answer is C, please complete the question 27-29.)

23. What industry are you in? _____

24. What kind of company or enterprise are you working for? ____
 A. Foreign companies;
 B. Sino-Foreign companies;
 C. State-owned companies;
 D. Private companies;
 E. Self-employed;
 F. Others ____ (Please note).

25. What kind of working position do you hold? ____
 A. Senior management;
 B. Management;
 C. Staff;
 D. Others ____ (Please note).

26. Please state the range of your monthly salary. ____
 A. 0-1,000 RMB;
 B. 1,000-2,000 RMB;
 C. 2,000-5,000 RMB;
 D. 5,000-8,000 RMB;
 E. 8,000-20,000RMB;
 F. Above 20,000RMB.

27. How long have you been working since you left the full-time education? ____
A. 0-1 Year;
B. 1-3 Year;
C. 3- 10 Year;
D. Above 10 Year.

28. Have you ever been employed? _____ (Yes/No).

29. If you were employed before, which industry were you in? _____
Which job did you do? _____

30. How long have you been unemployed? _____

Thank you so much for your time and help again!

It would be very useful for my research if I could interview some of you who have completed this questionnaire. The interview would be confidential and would be organized for a time and place that suit you. If you do not mind being interviewed by me in the future, please leave your name, email and contact details here.

Thank you so much!

Appendix 3: Interview schedules

1. Interview schedule 1: interview with course-participant student

I. Introduction

1. Greetings
2. The aims of the interview
3. Confidentiality and anonymity issues (all names of the people and companies will not be mentioned)
4. The possibility of recording
5. Thank you
6. Reconfirm the personal information of the interview

II. What is the situation of the job market in Shanghai?

1. Can you use any words to describe it? (According to your own experience)
2. What do you think the economic development brings people (hope and chances, or rather risks and challenges)?
3. What do you think is a good job, or to what extent you will consider a job as satisfying? (Salary, working, position, company structure, location, etc.)
4. In which sectors are these good jobs?
5. Which jobs carry most prestige and respect?
6. How can one get into these jobs?

III. What are the factors that determine an individual's success, in terms of study and jobs, etc? (Degree, the level of the institution, geographical origin, working experience, social capital elements, etc.)

1. Have you ever thought of your future job or plan after your graduation?
2. What is an idealized job for you?
3. What factors do you think are necessary for you to join the competition in the labour market?
4. Which factor would you like to achieve first and most?
5. Have you ever considered about or how have you tried to achieve these factors?
6. How do people achieve these factors?
7. In terms of your current situation, what advantages or disadvantages do you have?
8. What can these advantages bring to you? (Are they enough to keep you in a secured job position? Is the job more secured than before? Is it easier to lose the job?)

IV. Competition in the labour market (Now let's imagine you are going to find a job.)

1. Have you thought about the possible challenge or difficulties you may confront in the future job-seeking?
2. Who or which group of people will you consider as rival or threat to you? (Age, educational level, geographical origin, gender, etc.)
3. How about those people with similar qualification but more working experience? And those similar qualification but from other universities?
4. Do you feel feared to see those threats?
5. What have you done about it, if you feel afraid?
6. What do you think is the best thing you can do to keep yourself in the competition?

V. About lifelong learning and STTP (Now let's think back to the time when you were preparing your application to attend STTP.)

1. How much information have you known about STTP?
2. Why did you attend it?
3. What is the most important reason for you to attend?
4. Did you attend the exams? (any intention to attend)
5. What did you expect to learn or to obtain from STTP?
6. Have you even thought of cost-effect before actually taking parting in STTP?
7. If yes, what and how did you consider about it?
8. Have you tried to attend any other lifelong learning programme?
9. Any difference between STTP and the other lifelong learning programme you have attended?
10. Why do you think the government has set up and developed this programme?
11. In your opinion, what do you think is the aim to learn in a lifelong learning programme with qualification? (A way for you to develop your skill, or just to obtain some certificates, or something else?)

VI. About qualification

1. How many certificates or qualifications have you had so far?
2. If you are applying the idealized job you just mentioned, what kind of qualifications will you need?
3. How necessary do you think it is to possess those qualifications to do the jobs completely?
4. What or how can qualifications help you?
5. What are the qualifications useful or useless?
6. Which group of people need qualifications more than others?
7. What do you think of the value of qualifications, under the circumstance of higher education expansion and fierce competition in the labour market?
8. What do you think of the value of STTP and the qualification it brings?

VII. In general, what is lifelong learning to you?

2. Interview schedule 2: interview with the non-course-participant students

I. Introduction

1. Greetings
2. The aims of the interview
3. Confidentiality and anonymity issues (all names of the people and companies will not be mentioned)
4. The possibility of recording
5. Thank you
6. Reconfirm the personal information of the interview

II. What is the situation of the job market in Shanghai?

1. Can you use any words to describe it? (According to your own experience)
2. What do you think the economic development brings people (hope and chances, or rather risks and challenges)?
3. What do you think is a good job, or to what extent you will consider a job as satisfying? (Salary, working, position, company structure, location, etc.)
4. In which sectors are these good jobs?
5. Which jobs carry most prestige and respect?
6. How can one get into these jobs?

III. What are the factors that determine an individual's success, in terms of study and jobs, etc? (Degree, the level of the institution, geographical origin, working experience, social capital elements, etc.)

1. Have you ever thought of your future job or plan after your graduation?
2. What is an idealized job for you?
3. What factors do you think are necessary for you to join the competition in the labour market?
4. Which factor would you like to achieve first and most?
5. Have you ever considered about or how have you tried to achieve these factors?
6. How do people achieve these factors?
7. In terms of your current situation, what advantages or disadvantages do you have?
8. What can these advantages bring to you? (Are they enough to keep you in a secured job position? Is the job more secured than before? Is it easier to lose the job?)

IV. Competition in the labour market (Now let's imagine you are going to find a job.)

1. Have you thought about the possible challenge or difficulties you may confront in the future job-seeking?
2. Who or which group of people will you consider as rival or threat to you? (Age, educational level, geographical origin, gender, etc.)
3. How about those people with similar qualification but more working experience? And those similar qualification but from other universities?
4. Do you feel feared to see those threats?
5. What have you done about it, if you feel afraid?
6. What do you think is the best thing you can do to keep yourself in the competition?

V. About lifelong learning and STTP

1. Have you heard of STTP?
2. How much information have you known about STTP?
3. Why did you not attend it?
4. What is the most important reason for you not to attend?
5. Have you even thought of cost-effect before actually making decision?
6. If yes, what and how did you consider about it?
7. Have you tried to attend any other lifelong learning programme?
8. Any difference between STTP and the other lifelong learning programme you have attended?
9. Why do you think the government has set up and developed this programme?
10. In your opinion, what do you think is the aim to learn in a lifelong learning programme with qualification? (A way for you to develop your skill, or just to obtain some certificates, or something else?)

VI. About qualification

1. How many certificates or qualifications have you had so far?
2. If you are applying the idealized job you just mentioned, what kind of qualifications will you need?
3. How necessary do you think it is to possess those qualifications to do the jobs completely?
4. What or how can qualifications help you?
5. What are the qualifications useful or useless?
6. Which group of people need qualifications more than others?
7. What do you think of the value of qualifications, under the circumstance of higher education expansion and fierce competition in the labour market?

8. What do you think of the value of STTP and the qualification it brings?

VII. In general, what is lifelong learning to you?

3. Interview schedule 3: interview with the working course participants

I. Introduction

1. Greetings
2. The aims of the interview
3. Confidentiality and anonymity issues (all names of the people and companies will not be mentioned)
4. The possibility of recording
5. Thank you
6. Reconfirm the personal information of the interview

II. What is the situation of the job market in Shanghai?

1. Can you use any words to describe it? (According to your own experience)
2. What do you think the economic development brings people (hope and chances, or rather risks and challenges)?
3. What do you think is a good job, or to what extent you will consider a job as satisfying? (Salary, working, position, company structure, location, etc.)
4. In which sectors are these good jobs?
5. Which jobs carry most prestige and respect?
6. How can one get into these jobs?
7. In terms of your current situation, will you consider your current job as satisfaction?
8. Could you talk about your own aim or goal?

III. What are the factors that determine an individual's success, in terms of study and jobs, etc? (Degree, the level of the institution, geographical origin, working experience, social capital elements, etc.)

1. How do people achieve these factors?
2. Which factor would you like to achieve first and most?
3. Have you ever considered about or how have you tried to achieve these factors?
4. In terms of your current situation, what advantages or disadvantages do you have?
5. What can these advantages bring to you? (Are they enough to keep you in a secured job position? Is the job more secured than before? Is it easier to lose the job?)
6. Issues like 'promotion' can be explored.

IV. In terms of competition, who or which group of people will you consider as rival or threat to you? (Age, educational level, geographical origin, gender, etc.)

1. How about those new graduates, new arrivals?
2. Do you feel feared to see those threats?
3. What have you done about it, if you feel afraid?
4. What do you think is the best thing you can do to keep yourself in the competition?

V. About lifelong learning and STTP (Now let's think back to the time when you were preparing your application to attend STTP.)

1. How much information have you known about STTP?
2. Why did you attend it?
3. What is the most important reason for you to attend?
4. Did you attend the exams? (any intention to attend)

5. What did you expect to learn or to obtain from STTP?
6. Have you even thought of cost-effect before actually taking parting in STTP?
7. If yes, what and how did you consider about it?
8. Have you tried to attend any other lifelong learning programme?
9. Any difference between STTP and the other lifelong learning programme you have attended?
10. Why do you think the government has set up and developed this programme?
11. In your opinion, what do you think is the aim to learn in a lifelong learning programme with qualification? (A way for you to develop your skill, or just to obtain some certificates, or something else?)

VI. About qualification

1. How many certificates or qualifications have you had so far?
2. If you are applying the idealized job you just mentioned, what kind of qualifications will you need?
3. How necessary do you think it is to possess those qualifications to do the jobs completely?
4. What or how can qualifications help you?
5. What are the qualifications useful or useless?
6. Which group of people need qualifications more than others?
7. What do you think of the value of qualifications, under the circumstance of higher education expansion and fierce competition in the labour market?
8. What do you think of the value of STTP and the qualification it brings?

VII. In general, what is lifelong learning to you?

4. Interview schedule 4: interview with the working non-participants

I. Introduction

1. Greetings
2. The aims of the interview
3. Confidentiality and anonymity issues (all names of the people and companies will not be mentioned)
4. The possibility of recording
5. Thank you
6. Reconfirm the personal information of the interview

II. What is the situation of the job market in Shanghai?

1. Can you use any words to describe it? (According to your own experience)
2. What do you think the economic development brings people (hope and chances, or rather risks and challenges)?
3. What do you think is a good job, or to what extent you will consider a job as satisfying? (Salary, working, position, company structure, location, etc.)
4. In which sectors are these good jobs?
5. Which jobs carry most prestige and respect?
6. How can one get into these jobs?
7. In terms of your current situation, will you consider your current job as satisfaction?
8. Could you talk about your own aim or goal?

III. What are the factors that determine an individual's success, in terms of study and jobs, etc? (Degree, the level of the institution, geographical origin, working experience, social capital elements, etc.)

1. How do people achieve these factors?
2. Which factor would you like to achieve first and most?
3. Have you ever considered about or how have you tried to achieve these factors?
4. In terms of your current situation, what advantages or disadvantages do you have?
5. What can these advantages bring to you? (Are they enough to keep you in a secured job position? Is the job more secured than before? Is it easier to lose the job?)
6. Issues like 'promotion' can be explored.

IV. In terms of competition, who or which group of people will you consider as rival or threat to you? (Age, educational level, geographical origin, gender, etc.)

1. How about those new graduates, new arrivals?
2. Do you feel feared to see those threats?
3. What have you done about it, if you feel afraid?
4. What do you think is the best thing you can do to keep yourself in the competition?

V. About lifelong learning and STTP

1. Have you heard of STTP?
2. How much information have you known about STTP?
3. Why did you not attend it?
4. What is the most important reason for you not to attend?
5. Have you even thought of cost-effect before actually making decision?
6. If yes, what and how did you consider about it?
7. Have you tried to attend any other lifelong learning programme?
8. Any difference between STTP and the other lifelong learning programme you have attended?
9. Why do you think the government has set up and developed this programme?
10. In your opinion, what do you think is the aim to learn in a lifelong learning programme with qualification? (A way for you to develop your skill, or just to obtain some certificates, or something else?)

VI. About qualification

1. How many certificates or qualifications have you had so far?
2. If you are applying the idealized job you just mentioned, what kind of qualifications will you need?
3. How necessary do you think it is to possess those qualifications to do the jobs completely?
4. What or how can qualifications help you?
5. What are the qualifications useful or useless?
6. Which group of people need qualifications more than others?
7. What do you think of the value of qualifications, under the circumstance of higher education expansion and fierce competition in the labour market?
8. What do you think of the value of STTP and the qualification it brings?

VII. In general, what is lifelong learning to you?

5. Interview schedule 5: interview with the policy makers

I. Introduction

1. Greetings
2. The aims of the interview
3. Confidentiality and anonymity issues (all names of the people and companies will not be mentioned)
4. The possibility of recording
5. Thank you
6. Reconfirm the personal information of the interview

II. About the STTP programme

1. What are the origins of purposes?
 - On the official website, it explicitly explains that human capital theory is the supporting rationale to develop STTP. STTP aims at upgrading Shanghai citizens' knowledge and skills, and fostering a large group of people for skill shortage. Why do we invest in upgrading the existing/local personnel, rather than importing those already skilled from other places?
 - As I have noticed, there was a rapid expansion of STTP in the late 1990s and at the beginning of 2000, both in line with the programme scale and the number of participants. Are there any particular reasons for this?
 - Is the STTP programme designed and intended to involve particular groups of people (in terms of age, educational background, employment status and geographic origins, etc.)?
 - Who are the stakeholders of this programme? (Stakeholders mean those who are interested in this programme or have responsibilities in it.)
 - What are the roles of employers (industries) in STTP? Is STTP simply a response to the needs of employers?
2. How is the skill shortage identified?
 - What sorts of knowledge and skills are they looking for?
 - How are the STTP courses designed in relation to the skill shortage?
 - To what extent, are the STTP courses intended to be different from the courses delivered in higher education and other existing training courses?
3. How do the relevant organizations manage the course training and assessment?
 - How do the organizations/institutions market the programme?
 - How do they encourage people to participate in it?
 - How is the course delivery organized?
 - How is the course delivery regulated?
 - How is its assessment regulated and organized?
 - How is the quality of the assessment and the qualification assured?
 - To what extent do you think the qualifications from STTP stands for the knowledge and skills the holders have obtained?
4. What are your experiences so far?
 - In your opinion, what are the motivations for individuals to attend STTP?
 - Do these motivations meet or match the original purposes of STTP?
 - Do you keep any statistical data/indicators about the individual participation of STTP?
 - Which groups of people are the most active/the majority participants?
 - Is there any difference between the actual participants and expected participants (in terms of age, educational background, employment status and geographic origins, etc.)?
5. What is the actual value of STTP?
 - It is said 'the brand name of STTP has been taking root in the hearts of the people' on the official website of STTP. What roles of STTP or STTP certificates are

designed? (An education commodity, a useful tool to identify different talented people, or a certificate-chasing exercise?)

- In your opinion, how do the participants view the value of STTP?
- There is also a saying in the society that the qualifications from STTP can be compared to 'platinum certificates'. What do you think of this judgement?
- After more than ten years' practice, what actual value does STTP have to individuals and to the society?
- Do you think STTP opens up opportunities to people? If so, whom does it open up opportunities to?
- Do you think STTP advantage or reinforce the already advantaged group people? If so, who are the already advantaged?

III. About the competition in the labour market

1. What do you perceive as a labour market?
 - What elements consist of a labour market?
 - Is the current Shanghai labour market well-functioning?
 - What factors influence people's opportunities in the labour market?
2. In the previous interviews with participants and non-participants in STTP, the interviewees have identified several factors to compete in the Shanghai labour market, such as working experience, educational level, educational qualification, *hukou*. What do you think about these?
3. What do you think of the relationship between educational qualification and working experience? Are they substitute or complementary goods?
 - To what extent are qualification and working experience interchangeable or rather perceived interchangeable?
4. Also in the previous interviews, the interviewees identify the most advantaged group people are those in their late 20s and early 30s, with a bachelor degree or above and several years' working experience. In your opinion, who are the most advantaged group people in the labour market competition in Shanghai?

IV. About lifelong learning and learning society

1. What do you understand learning society and lifelong learning?
2. Which group of people need lifelong learning?
3. How does the government plan to do towards a learning society?
4. How does STTP fit into the governmental plan for building a learning society?

6. Interview Schedule 6: interview with the course deliverers

I. Introduction

1. Greetings
2. The aims of the interview
3. Confidentiality and anonymity issues (all names of the people and companies will not be mentioned)
4. The possibility of recording
5. Thank you
6. Reconfirm the personal information of the interview

II. About the STTP programme

1. What do you understand the training programme STTP?
 - What do you know about the background of developing this programme?
 - What do you know about the programme aims?

- Who do you think are the participants (in terms of age, educational background, employment status and geographic origins)?
- Who do you think are the stakeholders of this programme?
- 2. What do you understand the knowledge and skills delivered or trained in STTP?
 - Why are those knowledge and skills?
- 3. What are your experiences so far?
 - How do you structure your class?
 - How do you see the assessment after the training? How is it organized?
 - How is the issue of quality assurance in STTP?
 - Through your experience, which group people take part in STTP most?
 - What motivates the participants to attend STTP?
- 4. What do you think about the value of STTP?
 - It is said that 'the brand of STTP has been striking root in the hearts of the people' on the official website of STTP. Does the government design the programme as an 'educational commodity'?
 - There is also a saying in the society that the qualifications from STTP can be called 'platinum certificate'. What do you think of the social judgement of STTP?
 - To what extent do you think the qualifications from STTP stands for the knowledge and skills the holders have obtained?

III. About lifelong learning and learning society

1. What do you understand learning society and lifelong learning?
2. Which group of people need lifelong learning?
3. How does the government plan to do towards a learning society?
4. Is STTP a tool to realize a learning society? If so, how?

IV. About the competition in the labour market

1. In the previous interviews with participants and non-participants in STTP, the interviewees have identified several factors to compete in the Shanghai labour market, such as working experience, educational level, educational qualification, *hukou*. What do you think about these?
2. Also in the previous interviews, the interviewees identify the most advantaged group people are those in their late 20s and early 30s, with a bachelor degree or above and several years' working experience. In your opinion, who are the most advantaged group people in the labour market competition in Shanghai?
3. What do you think of the relationship between educational qualification and working experience? Are they substitute or complementary goods?

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